



University of  
Massachusetts  
Amherst

## Critical Rhetoric in the Age of Neuroscience

Item Type	dissertation
Authors	Ingram, Brett
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.7275/181e-7p15">10.7275/181e-7p15</a>
Download date	2025-01-19 03:09:27
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/39139">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/39139</a>

**Critical Rhetoric in the Age of Neuroscience**

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRETT INGRAM

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2013

Communication

© Copyright by Brett Ingram 2013

All Rights Reserved

# Critical Rhetoric in the Age of Neuroscience

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRETT INGRAM

Approved as to style and content by:

---

Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, Chair

---

Briankle Chang, Member

---

Randall Knoper, Member

---

Lisa Henderson, Department Head

Communication

## **DEDICATION**

To my son, Jules

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Stephen Gencarella, who in addition to serving as my dissertation advisor has also played the roles of mentor, editor, therapist, comic foil, would-be assailant, big brother, and best friend, often in the course of a single evening. He and his family Winnie, Marcella, Sal, Gina, and Tony have become part of my own family. Profound thanks must also go to my parents, Daniel and Deborah, who provided much-needed emotional and financial support over the course of my graduate odyssey. I am proud and humbled to become the second Doctor Ingram.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the members of my committee, Randall Knoper and Briankle Chang, whose writing and teaching were inspirational. Without their insights and generative questions, this project would never have come to be. Additionally, I want to thank my friend Viveca Greene, who helped me jumpstart the writing process whenever it stalled.

Finally, I thank Carmen, my loving partner and the mother of my forthcoming son, Jules.

## ABSTRACT

### CRITICAL RHETORIC IN THE AGE OF NEUROSCIENCE

FEBRUARY 2013

BRETT INGRAM, B.A., SHIPPENSBURG UNIVERSITY

M.A., NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Stephen Olbrys Gencarella

Although there has been an outpouring of scholarship on the “rhetorical body” in the last two decades, nearly all analyzes and critiques discourses *about* the body. Very little work in contemporary rhetorical studies addresses the ways in which rhetoric affects and alters the central nervous system, and thereby exerts influence at a level of subjective experience prior to cognitive and linguistic apprehension. Recent neuroscientific research into affect, identity, and decision-making echoes many of the claims made by ancient rhetoricians: namely, that rhetorical activity is corporeally transformative, and that the material transformations wrought by rhetoric have profound implications for subjects’ capacity to engage in critical thought and agential judgment. This study demonstrates that emotional political rhetoric is physiologically addictive, that the brain and body can make decisions independently of the will of the thinking subject, and that symbolic violence can physically reconfigure the neural networks that make critical cognition possible.

As public culture and discourse becomes increasingly imagistic, non-rational, and emotionally charged, critics must develop theoretical resources capable of recognizing and responding to new varieties of constitutive phenomena. Neuroscience can

supplement traditional rhetorical criticism by offering insight into the physiological processes by which destructive ideas become self-sustaining, and it can help critics devise more sophisticated rhetorical approaches to the task of promoting social healing. To advance this conversation, this dissertation outlines a critical neuro-rhetorical theory that is attuned to the Sophistic and Burkean rhetorical tradition, informed by contemporary neuroscience, and responsive to the unique cultural and social conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
ABSTRACT .....	vi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. CRITICAL METHODOLOGY.....	16
3. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	23
4. POLITICAL JUNKIES: AFFECTIVE POLITICS AND ADDICTIVE RHETORIC.....	55
Affect and the Brain.....	59
Addictive Politics.....	66
The Drugs of Rhetoric.....	71
Burke on Addiction and Belief.....	79
Rhetorical Recovery.....	84
5. VITAL SIGNS: CONSUBSTANTIALITY AND CORPOREAL RHETORIC	101
Agential Possession.....	105
The Internal Audience.....	112
New Vitalism and Critical Rhetoric.....	124
6. AN UNCRITICAL CONDITION: RHETORICAL VIOLENCE AND “BRAIN TRAUMA”.....	133
Symbolicity and Violence.....	139
The Neuronal Subject.....	152
The Politics of Rhetorical Violence.....	162

7. OUTLINE FOR A CRITICAL NEURORHETORIC.....	179
WORKS CITED.....	189

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

“Yes, we have a soul, but it is made up of many tiny robots”—Giulio Giorello,  
philosopher and neuroscientist

In the last twenty years, several prominent rhetorical critics have argued for a more expansive role for the corporeal body and embodied experience in rhetorical theory, and others have made the case that rhetoric is best conceived as a mediatory art that synthesizes the symbolic and the material.<sup>1</sup> Yet with few exceptions, rhetoricians have thus far overlooked the brain as a site where the material and the symbolic intersect, despite an explosion of interest in the brain in other disciplines in the humanities.<sup>2</sup> Rhetorical scholars’ reticence on matters of the neurological is perhaps understandable. Given the field’s long colonization by departments of English and Communication, its struggle to define its borders and establish its disciplinary independence might be endangered if it was shown that rhetorical principles could be reduced to neurobiological functions. However, as Leslie Thiele notes in *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Wisdom, Narrative, and Neuroscience*, recent neuroscientific studies of the brain “do not lead in

---

<sup>1</sup> Proponents of corporeal rhetoric include McKerrow (1998), Selzer and Crowley (1999), Condit (2000), Deluca and Harold (2005), Hawhee (2009). For theoretical work that emphasizes rhetoric as mediation between body and environment, see McGee (1982), Engnell (1998), Crable (2003), Gunn (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Rhetorical scholars who have addressed the brain include Gregg (1984), Walker (1990), Arthos (2000), Pruchnic (2008). Scholars from other fields in the humanities who have written extensively about the brain include Daniel Lord Smail (History), Leslie Thiele (Political Studies), Elizabeth Wilson (Gender Studies), Daniel Dennett (Philosophy), John Searle (Philosophy), Catherine Malabou (Philosophy), Elizabeth Grosz (Philosophy), Mark Turner (Literary Studies), Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Cultural Studies), William E. Connolly (Cultural Studies), Denis Dutton (Art Theory).

the direction of biological determinism or crass reductionism. Rather, they affirm the importance of (self)consciousness as a narrative process and confirm our creative ability to interact with and shape internal and external environments” (ix). They affirm, in other words, rhetoric’s profound role in the biological, psychological, cultural, and social constitution of the human.

Nevertheless, most rhetorical criticism focuses on the ways in which words change the mind, which is vaguely understood as “an immaterial idea processor” (Condit 1999: 330). In this model, the mind translates the influx of sensory data into language, and uses that language to decide what course of action the body should take. However, as cultural theorist Brian Massumi points out, “Our body thinks with pure feeling before it acts thinkingly” (2002: 266). What we experience as linguistic thought occurs after our brains and bodies have already made a series of judgments that impact what will become available to our conscious minds.

All perceptions of the world are intersensory—we can never fully divide the aural sense experience of spoken words from the visual or tactile sensory inputs and affective charges that accompany and precede the scene of rhetoric. As William Connolly notes, “the imbrications between embodiment, language, disposition, perception, and mood are always in operation,” and a theory or philosophy of language that ignores these influential vectors of experience “may seem precise and rigorous, but it does so by missing circuits of inter-involvement through which perception is organized” (2010: 182). Connolly observes that “corporate advertisers, cultural anthropologists, neuroscientists, TV dramatists, Catholic priests, filmmakers, and evangelical preachers are attuned to such memory-soaked patterns of inter-involvement,” yet “intellectualists”—those who

overstate “the autonomy of conceptual life, the independence of vision, the self-sufficiency of reason, the power of pure deliberation, or the self-sufficiency of argument”—are “less so” (2010: 183). It is odd that rhetoricians, who study the persuasive appeals of marketers, artists, religious leaders, scientists, and researchers in neighboring scholarly disciplines, should so often narrowly focus on but one aspect of their subjects’ rhetorical operations: that which is encoded in symbols and circulated publicly. Despite voluminous evidence that indicates language and cognition are only parts of a holistic communicative circuit that includes unconscious or preconscious physiological operations, little work in contemporary rhetorical studies addresses the ways in which rhetoric affects and alters the brain and body, and thereby influences the nature of thought before it is mentally apprehended by the subject in linguistic form.

The first rhetoricians would likely not recognize the notion that rhetoric moves minds, which then move bodies after a period of critical deliberation. From antiquity, rhetoric has been aligned with powers both natural and supernatural that circumvent or overpower the rational, deliberative mind and have a direct impact on the physical body. Both the ancient Sophists and Platonists understood rhetoric as a physically moving force. Their disagreements were less about whether it was a material or symbolic entity, but rather, whether it was a destructive or healing practice. As Peter Elbow notes, the central question for Socrates and Plato was “what pharmakon or antidote could safeguard the mind from the correlative rhetorical spell?” (51).

While Platonists sought to protect citizens from rhetoric, Sophists such as Gorgias reveled in the rhetor’s ability to reconfigure the material world through the savvy deployment of symbols, and taught paying customers how to administer this potent

substance. In *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias writes that “Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works,” and claims that

The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies. For just as different drugs dispel different secretions from the body, and some bring an end to disease and others to life, so also in the case of speeches, some distress, others delight, some cause fear, others make the hearers bold, and some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion. (S8)

He argues that Helen comes “under the influence of speech (*logos*), just as if ravished by force (*bia*)” (S12). According to Gorgias, persuasive discourse has effects on the human soul that, like drugs or physical force, overwhelm and cancel out the possibility of individual agency. Gorgias “shows that to be persuaded is to suffer compulsion no less than to be physically carried away” (Ford 175), and emphasizes “the extent to which we are acted upon and pressed into subservience by external forces out of our control” (Kennerly 276). Indeed, it is this totalizing power of rhetoric—its capacity to seize both mind and body, and thus render distinctions between them meaningless—that makes it more insidiously effective than physical force alone. Rhetoric can lead people to “both believe the things said (*tois legomenois*) and go along with the things done” (Gorgias S12); in other words, while brute coercion might induce people to do what is wrong, they nevertheless remain mentally cognizant of the ethical implications of their actions. By contrast, persuasive speech has effects that are pre-conscious, rooted in the corporeal body, and wholly determinative of subsequent thought and behavior. Robert J. Connors explains that what Gorgias is describing “is not the critical, analytical response of a literate audience, but rather what Havelock calls ‘submission to the paideutic spell,’ which involved the whole unconscious mind and probably the central nervous system, a

total loss of objectivity as the audience gives itself up to identification with the speaker and his goals” (48).

George Kennedy writes that Gorgias considered the rhetor to be “a *psychagogos*, like a poet, a leader of souls through a kind of incantation” (35). Jacqueline de Romilly, in *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, connects Gorgias with figures such as Empedocles and Pythagoras, practitioners of magical incantations reputed to bring healing. The physically transformative and interrelated nature of rhetoric, magic, and medicine was recognized for most of rhetoric’s history. It is rhetoric’s capacity to move bodies through space and time that led the ancient Greeks to categorize the rhetorician in the same class as the medical doctor and the mystic. In the sophistic/mystic tradition, “[M]ind exists in matter, and language affects matter: words and things are themselves volitional forces” (Covino 1992). Most ancient and pre-modern rhetoricians found nothing incompatible with idea that symbolic action is quite literally a material force. For instance, consider the following passage from the most famous of the Renaissance magicians, Cornelius Agrippa, composed nearly two-thousand years after Gorgias:

Words therefore are the fittest medium betwixt the speaker and the hearer, carrying with them not only the conception of the mind, but also the vertue of the speaker with a certain efficacy unto the hearers, and this oftentimes with so great a power, that oftentimes they change not only the hearers, but also other bodies, and things that have no life. (1: 69)

William Covino notes that the magician and the rhetor “are often the same figure throughout Western intellectual history” (1994: 19), and that the magician and the rhetor share an interest in “the *process* of inducing belief and creating community with reference to the dynamics of a rhetorical situation” (1994: 11, emphasis in original). Prior to the Enlightenment, “natural magic (which includes astrology, medicine, and alchemy)

is a rhetorical practice” and “[D]istinctions between the natural and social, corporeal and incorporeal, signifiers and signifieds, subjects and objects” do not operate with the same certainty that they do in the modern Western world (Covino 1994: 14).

Rhetoric’s power to seize control of consciousness, overwhelm conscience, and incite unruly behavior was widely acknowledged by ancient and modern philosophers, many of who feared its potential for abuse. In order to promote the ethical use of rhetoric, Plato invented a tripartite ontological narrative that separated the mind, body, and soul, and urged his students to suppress their physical desires with rigorous mental discipline for the betterment of their souls (*Phaedrus*). Plato established the basic ontological model that has been reinforced in different epistemes by Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke. These philosophers privileged transcendent ideals over and against material objects, and were suspicious of rhetoric because, they believed, it could be used to divert people away from truth and towards moral and physical debasement. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theorists such as Ludwig Wittengenstein, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault attacked ideals such as the Platonic soul, the Cartesian ego, and Kantian categorical imperatives by showing that such notions are all socio-linguistic constructs with neither material presence nor universal applicability. However, by making the claim that both metaphysical speculations and interpretations of physical reality are language games rather than truths, they “succeeded merely in reversing the hierarchy”—they removed the Ideal and replaced it with Language, while “effacing the material,” including the body (Condit 1999: 328). The 20<sup>th</sup> century “linguistic turn” in the humanities restored rhetoric’s prominence in Western philosophical and critical discourse, but in the process, rhetoric became unhinged from its pre-modern corporeal moorings, while remaining

entangled with a theory of mind rooted in Platonic Idealism and Enlightenment rationality.

However, not all modern Western critics believed these mind-body divisions were self-evident. Kenneth Burke, arguably the most influential rhetorician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote extensively about the interconnected and interdependent nature of body, language, and environment, a relationship that formed the basis of what he called “metabiology.” According to Burke, we should not reduce human motives to biological imperatives (as, for instance, evolutionary psychologists might recommend), but nor should we arrogantly assume that our capacity to use language marks us as beings who transcend nature, because the point of view from which we perceive and discuss nature is itself a part of nature (Thames 25). If we did not have the natural bodily equipment required to see, think about, and articulate our impressions of nature, we would not be able to talk ourselves into the idea that we are somehow extra-natural. Rhetoric is simultaneously a foundational aspect of our biological condition, and the tool we use to direct our physiological impulses towards one outcome or another. We can use rhetoric to achieve a degree of mastery over these impulses, but we cannot deny that they exist, and that they exert influence on our thought and behavior.

Although cognitive neuroscience was still in its infancy at the time Burke was writing, he nevertheless intuited a connection between the brain, rhetorical practices, and agency, and understood that this was compatible with the sophistic/mystic tradition.<sup>3</sup> For illustration, we can look to his speculations concerning the mystic trance, a neurological

---

<sup>3</sup> While the roots of neuroscience stretch back to the 1600s, before 1980, there was little interaction between neuroscience and cognitive science. Cognitive neuroscience—the scientific study of the neural substrates underlying psychology and cognition—was not firmly established as a field of study until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is the subfield of neuroscience most relevant to rhetorical studies.

state that seems to suggest neither fully passive nor active decision-making faculties (Burke 1969a: 294). In the mystic trance, the subject “loses the self” to substantive external forces which blur the line between symbolic and material inputs (visual images, verbal incantation, music, drugs), and which subsequently call into question distinctions between autonomy and possession, agency and obedience. Burke maintains that, in terms of body rhythms and susceptibility to persuasion, the drug addict and the poetry lover are quite similar: “in becoming receptive to so much, he becomes receptive to still more” (1968: 141). Burke’s work suggests “both drugs and poetry can be figured as transformative substances, both induce affective change, and both tap into bodily rhythms, creating and increasing receptivity” (Hawhee 2004:18). This prefigures late 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in neuroscience, and hints at fertile areas of convergence between the brain sciences and rhetorical studies that have yet to be fully explored.

Burke helps us to see that the correlation of “mind” to matter need not entail the reduction of human potential to evolutionary imperatives, nor does it eliminate the possibility that we can use language to change that which we find undesirable about the social world and ourselves. Indeed, evacuating the Cartesian ghost from the machine does not turn the human into a mindless computer made of flesh, an amoral and self-serving zombie, or any other metaphorical expression of sublimated existential dread. We may instead think of the mind-as-matter as raw material fashioned into a work of art by the cooperative, intertwined hands of nature, society, and the self.

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it was proposed as a corrective to mystical theories of the body and soul, neuroscience was predicated on an understanding of the brain as something of a physiological machine, with reasonably stable functions hardwired into its

material that operated according to universal laws independent of cultural experience. The idea that nature was like “a vast mechanism, and that our organs were machine-like, replaced the two-thousand-year-old Greek idea that viewed nature as a vast living organism, and our bodily organs as anything but inanimate mechanisms” (Doidge 12). One of the chief proponents of this idea was Rene Descartes, who argued that the brain and the nervous system worked like a pump, and that our nerves were tubes that ran from our limbs to our brains and back. While the hydraulic metaphor was substituted in subsequent epochs with metaphors foregrounding the dominant technologies of the day (the nervous system is like a telegraph; the nervous system is a computer), the underlying model of the brain-as-machine remained firmly in place until nearly the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, machines can’t regenerate or reconfigure their own parts. When a machine is broken, humans have to remove or replace faulty components, or abandon the machine altogether.

The machine metaphor, when applied to the human brain, produced the common wisdom that “after childhood the brain changed only when it began the long process of decline; that when the brain cells failed to develop properly, or were injured, or died, they could not be replaced. Nor could the brain ever alter its structure and find a new way to function if part of it was damaged” (Doidge xviii). Given this theory of the unchanging brain, neuroscientists adopted an attitude of neurological nihilism: they assumed that people born with brain limitations, or who sustained brain damage, would suffer from these conditions, without hope for change, for the rest of their lives. This scientific conclusion had profound effects on all areas of Western social and intellectual life. If their brains determined people’s dispositions and abilities, and if their brains were

incapable of being improved or repaired, then it followed that human nature was fixed and unalterable as well.

However, in recent years, the mechanistic model of the brain has given way to a plastic model that emphasizes the malleability of neural systems, which have been shown to be capable of radical physical reorganization after confrontations with traumatic injuries and experiences, or indeed, with the phenomena of everyday life, including rhetorical activity. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, pioneering neuroscientists first demonstrated that “the brain changed its very structure with each activity it performed, perfecting its circuits so it was better suited to the task at hand. If certain parts ‘failed,’ then other parts could sometimes take over” (Doidge xviii-xix). The key to the discovery was a change in neuroscientists’ research focus. For decades they had looked for answers in the cells of the brain. Beginning in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they began to see that the key to understanding thought and behavior could be found in the electrical patterns that travel through the neural cells. These electrical patterns “are the universal language ‘spoken’ inside the brain—there are no visual images, sounds, smells, or feelings moving inside our neurons” (Doidge 18). This perspective allowed neuroscientists to see that changes in the “language” of the nervous system created changes in the physical material that makes up the different parts of the brain. The brain is to a large degree constructed by events that occur in its internal linguistic system, a system that responds to the external events of the natural and social world.

Everything we think, see, hear, taste, and touch is represented in the brain on a virtual map, generated by the synaptic pathways that join neural cells in a vast, densely packed network. These synaptic pathways connect the respective parts of the brain that

control our auditory, visual, tactile, and emotional responses to external stimuli.

Whenever we encounter a particular stimulus, the pathways that represent its various elements—including how we visualize it, emotionally feel about it, and what kinetic response we believe is appropriate to it—are “lit up” by electrical currents. With each and every reiteration of that particular electrical pattern, the synaptic network that represents the external stimulus becomes stronger and deeper, and consequently, our “certainty” in regards to the stimulus increases.

For example, every time we see water and touch it and feel wetness, the electrical pattern that joins these visual and tactile centers in our brain and forms our synaptic network for “water” is re-energized, and we renew our confidence that water is looks and feels a certain way. We must here understand “certainty” not only to suggest abstract knowledge or beliefs in the mind, but also those manners of knowledge manifested in the body and in automatic physical responses. An experienced sailor learns to be cognitively certain that the earth is round, and makes navigational decisions based on this knowledge, but by the same token, her body, over time, becomes certain as to how to properly walk on the careening deck of sailboat caught in choppy waters, and it too makes decisions, though these judgment are not immediately available to our sailor’s conscious mind. However, should a sailor find herself landlocked for several years, she will most likely lose her ability to walk gracefully on a bucking yacht. Our synaptic networks need to be continually reinforced, or else they die out, and new networks take their place. The steady surface of flat earth will train the sailor’s brain to unconsciously expect her next step to fall on a predictable plane, and her body will act accordingly.

While cognitive and corporeal knowledge may arrive to us via different orders of experience, in neurological terms, they are born and nurtured by the same physiological processes and systems. Our sailor, upon being taken off the high seas, will not only be required to alter her corporeal habits of locomotion; she might also need to refashion her sense of identity, modulate her emotional behavior, and rearrange the guiding metaphors through which she interprets social encounters. These changed habits of mind, like her changed habits of motion, will also be manifested in material changes in her synaptic networks. Neuroscientists are increasingly interested in the ways that language alters the synaptic structures of the brain just as our interactions with the physical world do, and are probing the implications for things like political judgment, identity-formation, literacy, and religious conviction.<sup>4</sup>

With the discovery of the brain's plasticity, we are called upon to reconceptualize the relation between the body, the self, and the social world. Neuroplasticity suggests that individual subjectivity is not wholly predetermined by biological factors, but neither is it a matter of free play and pure performativity. Subjectivity "takes place" in the balance between the physiological traces, inscribed on the brain, of what one has been, and the possibility of what one can become based on the environment with which one is confronted and the decisions one makes. This suggests a greater degree of agency than is afforded to the individual by strict bio-determinists and structural materialists, but it must be understood that neuroplasticity renders our brains "not only more resourceful but also more vulnerable to outside influence," because once a "particular plastic change occurs in

---

<sup>4</sup> Approachable works on neuroplasticity include Damasio (1994, 1999), Merzenich (1996), Ramachandran (1999, 2011), Greenfield (1999), LeDoux (2002), Schwarz and Begley (2002), Ackerman (2004), Doidge (2007).

the brain and becomes well established, it can prevent other changes from occurring” (Doidge xx). Habituated patterns of thought and behavior cause repeated activations of certain neural circuits. Every time a circuit is activated, it becomes more deeply entrenched, and more resistant to change. Once established, internal neuronal structures “shape the perception and experience of the external world to their own form” (Wexler 144). This can help explain “private” matters like the substance addict’s resistance to sobriety, and “public” concerns such as the intransigence of ideology. Intriguingly, it also suggests that, in neurological terms, these phenomena are closely related to each other.

Social constructionism, as a theory of meaning-making, has a material corollary in brain tissue, as experience in the social world creates new synaptic pathways, strengthens some existing pathways, and weakens others based on the repetition or cessation of cognitive activity. Some social conditions make possible the development of richly textured frontal cortices in people, and thus, the ability to engage in richly textured and thoughtful social interactions and symbolic expressions. On the other hand, social conditions that produce physical deprivation and promote intellectual simplicity tend to inhibit people’s neurological development. The forms of political organization that create such conditions are reproduced not solely through the perpetual rational appeal of the ideas on which they are premised, but also because they inhibit the possibility of change by effacing the brain’s ability to critique present circumstances and conceive of alternative modes of living. Social constructionist criticism can tell us a lot about the ways linguistic practices constitute the content of consciousness, but it often fails to account for the recalcitrance of certain patterns of social behavior, often of an emotional or “irrational” nature, that seem to defy theoretical explanation, and seem resistant to

rhetorical intervention in the form of “better” ideas. Neuroplasticity can supplement rhetorical criticism by offering insight into the physiological processes by which destructive ideas become self-sustaining, and it can help us devise more sophisticated rhetorical approaches to the task of promoting social healing. It can be a boon to the field, if we rhetoricians accept our “positive self-image is to be gained not by staking ‘our’ special knowledge (culture/symbols) against ‘their’ special knowledge (natural scientific facts about physics and biology) but rather by ‘our’ ability to master/integrate both culture and biology, integrating them to account for the phenomena we care about—people and the world from which they emerge and that we dramatically shape.”<sup>5</sup>

Those who seek to deny humans’ biological origins often do so in the name of disavowing desires and practices which violate the rhetorically constructed—and therefore politically-invested and self-interested—parameters of permissible thought and action in a particular community. This is the case for both the relatively insular world of academic criticism, and for the larger political world, where the consequences potentially culminate in bloodshed. For Burke, this insight informs the proper goal of critical work. In *Counter-Statement*, he claims that “in so far as an age is bent, a writer establishes equilibrium by leaning,” either as his age leans or in the opposite direction (vii). In an era that is too disposed towards materiality, the critic should trumpet symbolism, and vice versa. Neither the symbolist nor the materialist critical orientation is in any essential way

---

<sup>5</sup> Condit, Celeste. *Pathos, for US*. Unpublished manuscript, available online at <http://ccondit.myweb.uga.edu/attic/>.

more “true” than the other, though one may become more academically trendy and acquire the temporary luster of what satirist Stephen Colbert has called “truthiness.”<sup>6</sup>

The following dissertation proceeds in the spirit of Burke’s call for a productively contrarian critical orientation. In our present age, mainstream American rhetorical studies has been partitioned from, and largely constituted against, the general domain of the biological, and more specifically, the neurobiological. It is my position that rhetorical critics who vehemently dismiss neurology, physiology, and biochemistry as antithetical to the rhetorical tradition are accidentally misreading or willfully ignoring some of the key ideas in that tradition in order to consolidate and stabilize a field of study that is, traditionally, flexible in its response to historical contingency, and unruly in its intellectual ambitions. It has become fashionable for humanist critics to decry the colonization of the humanities by the neurosciences, but, as I will demonstrate, the neurosciences are just beginning to catch up to what many important rhetoricians have been consistently arguing for more than two thousand years: symbols move matter, and this is vitally important for any serious discussion of politics and culture.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> I employ this term playfully, but pointedly. It was originally coined in 2005 by Colbert to denote “truth that comes from the gut, not books.” Truthiness was chosen as the 2006 “Word of the Year” by the American Dialect Society, which defines it as “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.” In the present context, I use it to suggest the point at which a critical orientation becomes uncritically accepted as *de rigueur*.

<sup>7</sup> Tallis (2008) is a representative and oft-cited example of the neuroscience backlash in the humanities.

## CHAPTER 2

### CRITICAL METHODOLOGY

This dissertation will offer a critical perspective on rhetorical criticism itself. By way of explanation, it may help to review the differences between rhetorical criticism and critical rhetoric, as I understand these terms. Rhetorical criticism, as it is traditionally conceived, can be a self-referential endeavor: criticism for criticism's sake. As Edwin Black declared, "criticism is what critics do"—it need not lead to other kinds of knowledge, and can (at least claim to be) ideologically disinterested (4). Its primary purpose is to catalogue elements of a rhetorical text's structural design (for instance, a speech's use of particular tropes) and to speculate upon the authorial intentions that undergird these stylistic choices. In terms of methodology, rhetorical critics perform close readings of individual or closely related texts. By contrast, critical rhetoric is motivated by a desire to contribute to social movements and effect material change, and is akin to fields within other disciplinary traditions, such as critical pedagogy, critical cultural studies, and critical performance studies. Critical rhetoricians do not merely describe the internal mechanisms that make a text work, aesthetically; they also identify what sort of work it is doing, politically. The critical rhetorician chooses her theoretical approach based on the political goals she wishes to accomplish through her critique. For example, a feminist critic may perform a psychoanalytic reading of the rhetoric of war propaganda in order to reveal the misogynistic impulses that often go unnoticed by the public. The critic's goal, in this case, is not simply to explain why the propagandist made certain choices when he was constructing his text—she also wishes to persuade her reader to accept or reject the claims made by the propaganda, and in so doing, she

produces a counter-text of her own, with the understanding that it too will be critiqued, and will inspire the production of still more texts.

Michael McGee, one of the first wave of scholars who established critical rhetoric in the late 1980s and early 1990s, distinguished it from the traditional rhetoric criticism of Edwin Black by claiming that “rhetoric is what rhetoricians do”—that is, rhetorical critics are different from other kinds of critics because they are primarily concerned with producing (instead of just analyzing) rhetoric (McGee 1990: 279).<sup>8</sup> Critical rhetoric can never be value-neutral. It is *productive* criticism, insofar as “it intentionally produces a strategic interpretation or structure of meanings, which privileges selective interests (but not necessarily exclusive individuals or groups) in specific circumstances” (Ivie). The key supposition of critical rhetoric is that rhetorical production is a defining property of criticism itself. Put simply, one cannot speak non-rhetorically about rhetoric, so it is better to acknowledge and embrace this rather than make spurious claims to objectivity.

Jim Kuypers, one of the most outspoken opponents of critical rhetoric, perceives in this movement the onset of the “tyranny of political correctness,” and “the hard marching, rhythmically thumping black boots of critical theory.” He argues that the proper role of the critic is to undertake an “objective reconstruction of the situation” presented by rhetorical texts (Kuypers). Kuypers claims that critical rhetoric produces sterile, formulaic criticism, because criticism is judged only by the ideological effects it generates, and therefore rhetoricians are compelled to only make arguments that cohere with the fashionable politics of the day.

---

<sup>8</sup> Important early contributions to critical rhetoric include McGee (1982, 1990), Wander (1984), McKerrow (1989), Hariman (1991), Ono and Sloop (1992), Crowley (1992).

Despite Kuypers' recourse to an epistemology of objectivity that has been largely discredited, we should not too easily dismiss his underlying concerns. He articulates a neo-Aristotelian understanding of rhetoric "as a thing contained within the territory of politics and domesticated by this confinement" (Leff 53). Neo-Aristotelians maintain that rhetorical criticism is an important part of cultural life, but it should have a clearly defined object and style, otherwise, it loses that which makes it distinctive from other forms of discourse. If, as critical rhetoric suggests, all rhetorical activity is political, including both cultural texts and the criticism of those texts, then there is no sphere of discourse that lies outside of politics: we are all critics, and we are all politically motivated, whether we acknowledge it or not. According to the neo-Aristotelians, this represents an existential threat to the discipline because it calls into question rhetoric's status as a sovereign intellectual field. If everyone is doing rhetoric all of the time, then why do we need specialists called "rhetoricians"?

Critical rhetoricians would answer that rhetoricians are necessary because someone needs to make people aware that they are situated within discourse, and that the truths they hold to be self-evident are in fact rhetorically constructed, historically contingent, and politically-implicated. These critics conceive rhetoric as "a power that ranges across [the] entire domain of human discourse, containing whatever matter it encounters" (Leff 53). This understanding of rhetoric's scope echoes that of the ancient Sophists. While not every one of the first wave of critical rhetoricians explicitly identified his or her project with neo-Sophistry—Michel Foucault was a more common shared reference point—their work was animated by the sophistic view that concepts such as "reality" and "truth" are rhetorical constructs that are always already imbued with social

power. The critic's job is to recognize this inescapable condition, to admit to his or her vested interest in advocating a particular perspective, and to use criticism to redirect currents of power/discourse in socially responsible ways.

The split between the Aristotelian and Sophistic critical traditions is not about what rhetoric is; rather, it is about what rhetoricians should or should not claim to do. Neo-Aristotelians endorse an analytic mode of criticism that locates itself outside of the political discourse it takes as its primary object of study, while neo-Sophists maintain that criticism is itself a political discourse, and refuse to shy away from partisanship. Although they differ in their understanding of proper disciplinary boundaries and practices, both neo-Aristotelians and neo-Sophists agree that criticism changes the way people think about texts. The former group is interested in the use of criticism to judge excellence in a narrowly defined realm of rhetorical practice, while the latter group is dedicated to the use of criticism as a tool for political advocacy and intervention.

Critical rhetoricians believe rhetoric can and should change the material world, but there are diverging opinions as to how rhetoric, a seemingly immaterial force, can move matter. For instance, Marxist rhetorical critics maintain that rhetoric can focus the revolutionary energies required to reorganize the economic system that determines the distribution of material resources, and groups privileged within the existing system can extinguish dissent by controlling the dissemination of rhetoric.<sup>9</sup> Poststructuralist rhetorical critics claim that discursive practices determine the symbolic meanings attributed to different kinds of material bodies, but refuse to locate a singular source of

---

<sup>9</sup> Lentricchia (1985), Aune (1994), and Cloud (2001) are representative works in the Marxist strain of critical rhetoric.

power in the realm of the economic.<sup>10</sup> They understand power as a free-floating, ever-present, immaterial force, the flows of which are always in flux, and always up for grabs. Despite disagreements about the degree to which we should emphasize economic or linguistic determinants, both camps share a belief that, ultimately, “rhetoric is not substantive, since it is a form of action that generates or manages material without ever resting in a material embodiment” (Leff 53).

Critical rhetoric has not significantly altered its conception of rhetoric’s materiality and embodiment since it was first theorized in the 1980s. Twenty years ago, Maurice Charland published a landmark essay called “Rehabilitating Rhetoric: Confronting Blindspots in Discourse and Social Theory,” in which he argued that “rhetoricians must shed insularity and engage grand debates...and critically examine the assumptions of their own practice” (465). At the time, the discipline was experiencing anxiety because the ascendancy of cultural studies threatened its premiere status within communication studies. During such episodes of perceived crisis, rhetoricians must choose between a conservative return to guiding principles—which is to say, a renewed insistence on clearly demarcated disciplinary boundaries and discipline-specific critical practices—or a progressive openness to dialogues with other fields of study and forms of knowledge. In the 1980s/1990s, they chose the latter option, rejecting the limited ambitions of traditional rhetorical criticism and inaugurating a much more expansive critical rhetoric which was deeply informed by cultural and social theory.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rhetorical scholars are again called upon to decide where the field stands in a changing academic milieu. Advancements in the neurosciences are

---

<sup>10</sup> McGee (1982), Butler (1990), and Greene (1998) are classic examples of this trajectory.

opening up new questions about language, the body, and society that are being vigorously debated by virtually every discipline within the humanities. Thus far, the few rhetoricians who explicitly engage neuroscience have, for the most part, assumed a conservative stance towards it, retreating into a peculiar form of rhetorical criticism that espouses the neo-sophistic attitude towards language and epistemology, but employs it for neo-Aristotelian purposes: to justify the sovereignty, and superiority, of “the rhetorical tradition,” over and against the emergence of hybrid approaches to humanistic inquiry. Just as an earlier generation of rhetorical critics railed against the critical rhetoricians’ claim that critical objectivity was an antiquated and politically dangerous fantasy, so too contemporary rhetoricians such as Daniel Gross, Jordynn Jack, and others reject, or simply ignore, the notion that discourse is physically embodied in the brain, or that pre-linguistic neurological processes exert significant influence on subjectivity, agency, and judgment.

In the next section, I will survey some of the objections contemporary rhetoricians have lodged against the incorporation of neuroscientific knowledge into rhetorical studies, and then identify some areas where the research concerns of rhetoricians and cultural critics are aligned with those of neuroscientists. My purpose is to begin the process of building pipelines between different disciplinary traditions, a project I will pursue with greater specificity and detail in later chapters that focus on addiction, agency, and violence. First, however, I think it is important to provide the reader with a sense of the conversation currently taking place within rhetorical studies about the proper role of the brain and body in critical discourse. I want to establish the potential points of resistance before I move forward with my own recommendations regarding the direction

the field should take. If at times I diverge from the traditional form that a dissertation literature review tends to take, it is an intentional departure. I attempt to sketch out a conversation, rather than to catalogue information, because in my view, the problem is not that rhetoricians lack awareness of neuroscience; it is that they have adopted a narrative about the nature of the rhetorical tradition that shuts down cross-disciplinary dialogue before it has a chance to begin. The following section is my attempt to represent that narrative, and suggest correctives to its current trajectory.

### CHAPTER 3

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

At its worst, anxiety about the encroachment of outside disciplines into rhetoric's home territory results in just the sort of reactionary criticism that Kuypers anticipated. For example, Susan Jarratt is skeptical of a corporeal turn in rhetorical criticism, and writes that she is "hard pressed to envision" how such practices "will enable us to use histories of rhetoric to address the truly disastrous global situations we currently face" (218). Jeanne Fahnestock acknowledges that language is "an area of overlapping concern" for rhetoricians and neuroscientists, but she claims that the "specific answers that cognitive scientist or neuroscientists come up with are not likely to be interesting to rhetoricians," and concludes that rhetoric scholars "need not and should not imitate cognitive neuroscientists. As humanists, they should continue to concentrate on historically situated texts and the political, social, and cultural events and trends they embody" (160, 175). Jordynn Jack, editor of the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly's* 2010 special issue called "NeuroRhetorics," cautions rhetoricians "who may be attracted to neuroscientific research that uses imaging tools (such as fMRI) to draw inferences about rhetorical concepts" to be beware of "analytical pitfalls." She counsels us to "play close attention" to neuroscientific terms, "being sure to tease out what these terms mean and to the potential suasive impact of such terms" (Jack 2010: 20); to consider "how topoi function as rhetorical choices" (Jack 2010: 23); and to "carefully read" popular accounts of neuroscience "with a rhetorical lens" (Jack 2010: 27). In other words, she reminds rhetorical critics to be rhetorical critics, but does not cite a single example of rhetorical criticism that failed to do the things she mentions.

In lieu of offending parties, Jack projects guilt onto straw men: she invents a parodic “neurorhetorician” named “Dr. Aspasia Cranium” who reduces the power of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech to brain scans, peddles “Silver Tongue (Unleash Your Rhetorical Power)” DVDs and video games on infomercials, and bestows Bachelor of Neurorhetoric certificates on gullible customers. Throughout her essay, she repeatedly uses speculative constructions such as “we might be tempted to” and “we might be attracted to” in order to justify her preemptive set of prohibitions (2010: 27). While the special issue of *RSQ* could have been a showcase of, and launching pad for, compelling new neurorhetorical scholarship, Jack unfortunately uses her editorial position to draw the discipline back from the brink of breakthrough, and points to non-existent enemies as the reason for retreat.

The rhetoric of her introductory article’s title—“This is Your Brain on Rhetoric: Empathy and Reason in Neuroscience Studies”—is telling of the intellectual conservatism that underpins her approach to neurorhetoric. Its nod towards the iconic Reagan-era “Just Say No” anti-drug public service announcements (“This is your brain on drugs—any questions?”) hints that the article might contain fresh insights into the link between drugs and rhetoric that has previously been explored by heavyweights such as Gorgias, Burke, and Derrida, but this is not the purpose of Jack’s project.<sup>11</sup> Her real aim is to prompt curious rhetoricians to “just say no” to neuroscience by warning them, before they commence furtive experimentation, of the dangers it represents to the health of field. Jack claims that we must “unpack” the assumptions underlying neuroscientific studies by analyzing their use of rhetorical concepts such as emotion, reason, or empathy,

---

<sup>11</sup> Hawhee (2004) reviews links between drugs and rhetoric in Burke’s corpus, and Derrida (1993) offers his thoughts on drugs in a published interview.

but ultimately, she simply reiterates the well-worn claim, almost universally accepted within rhetorical studies, that scientific discourses are invested with social power (as are all discourses).

Several rhetoric scholars have already echoed Jack's call for disciplinary isolationism and conservatism in matters pertaining to the brain. In a 2012 article called "Priming Terministic Inquiry: Toward a Methodology of Neurorhetoric," Chris Mays and Julie Jung write that Jack's article "provides directions for conducting neurorhetorical research that mirror the kind of cross-disciplinary exchange we both advocate and model in our article" (57). Mays and Jung "propose a neurorhetoric that takes as its subject discursive networks constitutive of contemporary neuroscience," one which emphasizes "the rhetoricity of emerging research in brain science" in order to work against "inducements to claim such research as foundational (42). Mays and Jung call into question research in the humanities and social sciences that applies neuroscientific insights to explain how political speech shapes political attitudes. One of their targets is George Lakoff's *The Political Mind*. Lakoff claims that "[L]anguage is a tool, an instrument—but it is the surface, not the soul, of the brain. I want us to look beneath language. New curtains won't save your house if the foundation is cracking" (15). In another work, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, co-written with Steven Johnson, Lakoff makes the fairly uncontroversial claim that certain guiding metaphors, such as the future is "in front of us" and past is "behind us," are for the most part universally acquired early in life and embodied in neural pathways. Lakoff's position, they argue, is "inimical to assumptions that inform rhetorical inquiry" (Mays and Jung 47). They write, "not only does Lakoff and Johnson's promotion of 'embodied' childhood experience as central to metaphor

formation deemphasize the cultural nature of metaphoric understanding, their theory also effectively demotes (from a rhetorical point of view) language from epistemic to epiphenomenal” (Mays and Jung 47). According to the authors, because a “positivistic” outlook on knowledge is “roundly disputed” in “rhetorical circles,” such research should not inform the development of rhetorical theory.

Mays and Jung’s argument is problematic on many levels. While decrying the air of authority that scientific knowledge confers on research in the humanities that employs it, the authors simultaneously claim authority over the rhetorical tradition, as if this were a stable and impermeable body. As I will demonstrate, the idea that metaphoric understanding is purely “cultural,” or that language is thoroughly “epistemic,” are by no means definitively settled within the community of rhetoric scholars. Furthermore, while it is without question necessary to emphasize the rhetoricity of scientific arguments as we import them to our field, if we are to be true to the critical spirit which inspires such work, we must also rigorously interrogate the rhetoricity of “the assumptions that inform rhetorical inquiry” so that we do not inadvertently rest on a foundation of anti-foundationalism. While it is true that, as Mays and Jung claim, “we cannot and will not ever know completely what terms mean” (56), this is not reason to cease the operations by which we continuously remake the field of rhetorical studies by challenging theoretical orthodoxies as soon as they threaten to cement into dogma.

Daniel M. Gross employs a nearly identical approach to Jack, Mays, and Jung in his well-received book *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle’s Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science*. His central thesis is that neuroscientific discourse cannot be

“reliably purged of race, gender, age, cultural bias, and so on” (Gross 31); therefore, according to Gross, the entire endeavor is fatally flawed. He writes that neuroscientists “are not studying the social brain with an adequate understanding of what it means to be social, and they are certainly not improving society” (Gross 35). Gross maintains that subjective experiences “have an essential social component and are best treated with *social analysis* of the sort developed in the rhetorical tradition rather than “scientific analysis that must reduce social phenomenon in certain crucial ways so as to function properly as science” (28, emphasis in original). His disapproval extends from neuroscientists, to the scholars in American rhetorical studies who “rarely appeal adequately to the rhetorical tradition,” to “leading humanists” who have “emboldened brain scientists to expand their theories to a (dramatically impoverished) social world, at the expense of a more nuanced, humanistic perspective of the sort initiated by Aristotle and assumed, to great advantage, in a wide range of early modern literature” (Gross 9, 29).

Gross’s seemingly unintentional parroting of neo-conservative rhetoric is troubling, but also suggestive of the emotional coordinates which orient most conservative thought. He claims that the social world is “impoverished,” and fantasizes that neuroscientists, “emboldened” by critics who “inadequately” adhere to his preferred model of the rhetorical tradition, have initiated an imperialistic expansion into rhetoric’s sovereign territory. Gross writes that “one shudders to think” what a society that draws from the neurobiology of emotion to formulate policies capable of, in Antonio Damasio’s words, “reducing human distress and enhancing human flourishing,” might look like (35). Gross’s publisher, the University of Chicago Press, advertises that his book “rescues the

study of the passions from science and returns it to the humanities and the art of rhetoric.” This sort of language seems quite intentionally designed to intensify the anxiety that attends to cross-disciplinary encounters, for the purpose of maintaining secure disciplinary boundaries. It is also a representative example of what Condit calls “the form of critique that has come to dominate rhetorical studies,” which she claims “is rhetorically inept for bringing about the positive social change it claims to seek; such critique has been blind to its primary emotional driver—which is self-congratulatory moral outrage” (*Pathos, for Us* 26).

Despite their claim for the importance of the rhetorical tradition, Gross and Jack neglect a key contribution of Kenneth Burke, namely his call for comic correctives to tragic frames (Burke1984b: 166-175). Their vision for rhetorical studies is quintessentially tragic, in the most thoroughgoing Burkean sense of the term. Tragic rhetoric promotes the illusion that a community was once pure and whole, claims this idyllic state has been sullied by the encroachment of a threatening Other, and justifies the rejection or expulsion of that Other as necessary for the restoration of order. Such rhetoric prompts group cohesion through a shared sense of victimage and a shared goal of redemption. In times of crisis and change, human societies often revert to tragic thinking, and it is perhaps not surprising that the same should be true in the community of rhetorical scholars. However, there are a number of rhetoricians who have tried, with varying degrees of success, to break through the disciplinary divide.

Although Burke gingerly probed at the neurological roots of human communication, the first sustained discussion of the subject can be found in Richard Gregg’s overlooked *Symbolic Inducement and Knowing: A Study in the Foundation of*

*Rhetoric*. Gregg argues, “Any discussion of human behavior must square with what is known about the neurophysiology of the brain” (26). His central thesis is that we can locate a universal perspective on human knowledge by identifying the neurological processes common to all human communication. He calls these processes the six principles of symbolic inducement: boundary formation, rhythm, association, classification, abstraction, and hierarchy. These internal operations have corollaries in the domains of symbol production (such as music notation, mental images, or language) and social interaction (such as political or interpersonal communication). According to Gregg, symbolization “refers to all that the human brain and mind does” (137). Since rhetoric is the inducement of belief or action through the use of symbols, then all experience that produces knowledge is characterized by rhetoric (Gregg 137). We still might question why the language of symbolism and rhetoric provides a preferable account of how experience is instantiated in the body than does the vernacular of science. As Walter Carleton notes, Gregg’s case for rhetorical knowledge “rests, quite simply, on an analogy between physical knowing processes, conceptual/verbal knowing processes, and socio-cultural knowing processes. The key to the analogy...is his observation that all these processes work in similar ways” (236). Why engage in the language game of rhetoric rather than another game to which it is comparable?

Among contemporary rhetorical scholars, Celeste Condit has arguably been the most adept at addressing this question. She is among the first to locate the intersection of language and social environment in the corporeal body. Condit notes that experiences arrive to the human mind through code systems, which means they must be interpreted using cultural knowledge (2000: 21). At the same time, we are not blank slates to be

wholly determined by the coding systems into which we are born. Genetics and aspects of the physical environment also have a hand in shaping human potential. She argues that “we need to study both nature and nurture, and how they interact” if we are to move beyond the limitations imposed by a scholarly tradition that pits science versus the humanities in an antagonistic competition for epistemological supremacy (Condit 2000: 8). There is no simple way to compare and contrast the degree to which various symbolic, biological, and environmental factors exert determinative influence upon humans, because the degree to which one becomes more or less influential than another will vary depending on circumstances: genetic limitations may be overridden in environments which provide the resources necessary to do so, while the same genetic make-up may prove debilitating in a less resource-rich context. Likewise, communication can be inhibited or facilitated by different corporeal states and social conditions.

The larger implication of Condit’s work is that a “robust paradigm for communication study cannot seek to reduce all variables to one type of variable, but rather must devise ways of incorporating variables that operate in radically different ways... This will require that we continue to develop paradigms and methods that operate at and integrate multiple levels of analysis from the individual to the social to the biological” (2000: 23). Condit shows us that rhetoric is conditioned both by external factors in the material world, and by internal physiological states. Most importantly, she argues convincingly that these two vectors of influence are co-implicative. For critics, this means that if we are to be intellectually responsible, as opposed to merely politically expedient, we must not ignore areas of human knowledge that lie outside of our disciplinary comfort zone.

Thus far, most rhetoricians have been slow to follow Condit's engagement with biology and physiology, despite frequent declarations that the field must come to terms with "corporeality."<sup>12</sup> They are eager to embrace the body within the fold of rhetorical studies, yet reticent to stray too far from a focus on externalized, public representations of internal states.<sup>13</sup> The interior body's role in conditioning the production of rhetoric remains for the most part unexamined. For instance, Raymie McKerrow, in "Corporeality and Cultural Rhetoric: A Site for Rhetoric's Future," claims that "an understanding of rhetoric as corporeal is not a method of doing or seeing rhetoric, but rather an attitude one takes towards the rhetorical act" (1998: 320). His aim is to change the standard of judgments made towards rhetorical acts by legitimizing those forms of rhetoric, such as expressive emotionality, that are commonly devalued in public culture and rhetorical studies because of their association with irrationality and, by extension, with femininity. McKerrow writes that a "focus on an embodied rhetoricity...encompasses affective as well as purely cognitive dimensions of the human person—an emphasis on how affective expression is given voice need not be separate from the body from which it emanates" (1998: 323). McKerrow is interested in how we come to judge emotional displays in others, and he ultimately calls for greater empathy for those who employ emotion ("embodied rhetoric") rather than reason ("administrative rhetoric") to make public arguments. The focus here is on the social body, broadly conceived, and not the biological individual, and as such it remains unclear as to how individual subjects are to conceive of their own affective experiences as politically relevant in a cultural context

---

<sup>12</sup> A notable exception is Hawhee (2004, 2009), who consistently grounds her work at the intersection of rhetoric and the physical body, though she does not address neuroscience with any specificity.

<sup>13</sup> Examples include Patterson and Corning (1997), Deluca (1999), Hauser (1999), Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001), Jordan (2004), and most of the essays collected in Selzer and Crowley (1999).

that generally associates the public airing of “private” emotions with mental weakness or a lack of seriousness. McKerrow shifts the onus of responsibility to the critic, who is asked to widen the purview of what expressive rhetorical styles he or she deems acceptable, and away from the rhetor, who is implicitly encouraged to indulge in whatever expressive style feels natural, despite the effect this might have on the reception of his or her message.

McKerrow’s political concerns are admirable, but his proposal does not account for the ways cultural phenomena produce the internal affective intensities that result in outward displays of emotion, nor does he address the ways in which affective experience is converted to political currency by institutions of administrative power. For instance, while his essay mainly points to women, ethnic minorities, and progressive politicians as examples of people whose voices have been marginalized by the administrative rhetorical tradition, patriarchal or conservative voices are conspicuous in their absence, though these groups have been masterful in marshaling affect in the service of power, particularly in the mass media (conservative radio and television punditry) and in politics (the manipulation of national tragedies such as 9/11 as motivation for war). McKerrow’s use of the term “corporeal” seems to promise an investigation into the role somatic experience plays in the production of rhetoric, but instead it coaches us on how to interpret the somatic experiences of others, and thereby reinstalls mind-body dualism even as it calls for its overthrow: we are the self-aware minds responding to the emotionally expressive body of the other.

Nevertheless, McKerrow’s essay helped to legitimize investigations of the affective dimension of rhetoric, and emboldened critics to engage the topic with greater

breadth and depth. In recent years, the study of emotion has emerged as the most promising point of convergence between public and embodied rhetorics.<sup>14</sup> In general, contemporary rhetoricians who engage emotion argue that the negative connotations associated with emotional rhetoric are undesirable, insofar as they privilege a white, male, heterosexual rhetorical tradition, and devalue other rhetorical traditions that are more open to emotion as a legitimate discursive mode. The argument that we need to be more tolerant of these marginalized rhetorical styles has served as the fulcrum for the critical and theoretical movement that seeks to return rhetorical studies to the body. Most rhetoricians agree that the value of emotional rhetoric lies in its excessiveness—it overflows the boundaries of reason and calls attention to the limitations of dualistic constructions such as mind/body, truth/falsity, and self/other. The assumption that follows from this is that once people see that these binaries are man-made rather than natural, they will reject them, and commence the work of building a more egalitarian social order.

Much of the work that examines emotion, rhetoric, and political action deals with expressions of anguish and rage that follow from atrocities such as the Kent State shooting and the lynching of Emmitt Till. However, when we look at other physiological responses such as laughter, which tends to erupt spontaneously and refuses to adhere to moral imperative or political ideology, we are forced to confront an often overlooked or unspoken aspect of embodied rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> As Butterworth notes, “embodied arguments do not always or necessarily lead to progressive outcomes” (248). Herein lies the problem

---

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, McKerrow (1998), Hariman and Lucaites (2001), Harold and Deluca (2005).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Davis (2000), Olbrys (2006).

with the rhetoric of the body, as it has thus far been conceived in rhetorical criticism. To translate the corporeal body into the representational “body” is to imprison it in language, which is, of course, always an act invested with power. Therefore, the argument that we must set the body free from such constraints by adjusting our interpretive attitudes towards outward expressions of emotionality is not a particularly radical gesture, it is a realignment of already existing imprisoning linguistic structures. It is a reinforcement of the very divisions between us and them, mind and body, that is purports to critique, in which we are identified, and thus already constituted, as the rational agents bearing witness to a foreign Otherness. In much the same way that calls for “tolerance” presuppose a fundamental separation between the one who tolerates and the other who is to be tolerated, a rhetorical theory of the body that is premised on a split between private thought and public action is destined to maintain the separation of embodiment and rhetoricity it supposedly wants to abolish. As Condit notes, a theory of emotion “that ignores human bodies is nothing but a theory of ideology or style dressed up as affect. A theory of emotion that ignores the social level, not only cannot attend to issues of ‘the public’ but also, ignores the repetitive forces that lead specific bodies to be prompted to specific emotions in specific patterns through space-time.”<sup>16</sup>

If rhetoric scholars hope to find a way out of this epistemological and ontological dilemma, we might begin by re-examining how we understand the word “emotion.” The legacy of Aristotelian rhetoric has led critics to associate emotions brought about by rhetoric with alterations in conscious acts of deliberative judgment. But this overlooks the internal, preconscious processes that happen between the moment a message is received

---

<sup>16</sup> Condit, Celeste. “Affect, Emotion, and Public Deliberation.” <http://pathosworkshop.com/emotion-affect-and-deliberation/>.

by the subject, and the moment when the sensations that message has aroused compel the subject to produce a thought or message of his or her own. Following Massumi, we might call the raw, initial impulse *affect*. Affect “broadly refers to states of being, rather than to their manifestation or interpretation as emotion” (Hemmings 551). Affect, according to Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, is

the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability.

(1)

This definition zones in on the motivational qualities of affect, and in so doing identifies a component of the rhetorical process that often passes without comment, namely, the energy or force that occupies a transitional space between the reception of rhetoric and its conversion into thought. Massumi writes that affect is a “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (1987: xvi). Affect is essentially “meaningless,” though influential, until it is translated into language, at which point it is converted into a *feeling*. Eric Shouse explains that a feeling is “a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labeled. It is personal and biographical because every person has a distinct set of previous sensations from which to draw when interpreting and labeling their feelings.” Finally, according to Massumi, we come to *emotion*, which is “qualified intensity” or “intensity owned and recognized”; it emerges through “the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which from that point onward is defined as personal” (2002: 28). Massumi describes emotions as having “narrativized” content shaped through cultural, social, and political contexts (Rice

201). Charles Altieri explains that emotions, as opposed to feelings, involve “the construction of attitudes that typically establish a particular cause and so situate the agent within a narrative field” (qtd. in Frank 515). If feelings locate the individual within his or her own personal history, emotions position that subjective status within the comparative field of the wider culture.

Emotion is the culturally specific framework through which universally experienced affective intensities must pass as affect is given expression. For instance, nearly all humans experience the affect of fear, but whether that fear is outwardly manifested through sobbing or fury depends upon culturally determined and personally developed criteria of appropriateness. Lawrence Grossberg explains, “emotion is the articulation of affect and ideology. Emotion is the ideological attempt to make sense of some affective productions” (316). Unlike feelings, the display of emotion can be either genuine or faked: I may bodily experience an affective impulse that compels my body to flee from threat, but because I am situated within an ideological context that demands the performance of hegemonic masculinity, I can demonstrate an emotional orientation of steely implacability. The possibility of willed deception indicates that emotions are the result of judgments made by the emoting subject, but affect is the catalyst that brings emotion into being. Emotions are rhetoric’s public face, the most visible portion of the rhetorical circuit, but they are only one element in a dynamic that internally joins body, mind, and the social world. Turning our attention from emotion to affect lets us begin the process of getting at that which has heretofore remained largely unnamed, because it is, by definition, unrepresentable: it is a force that precedes, and motivates, the translations of somatic impulses into language. It is a means to think about how “the ‘outside’ realms

of the pre-/extra-/para-linguistic intersect with the ‘lower’ or proximal senses (such as touch, taste, smell, rhythm and motion-sense, or alternately/ultimately, the automatic nervous system)” (Gregg and Seigworth 8). Ben Anderson comments, “the key political and ethical task for a cultural politics of affect is to disclose and thereafter open up points of potential” (2010: 162) on what Raymond Williams calls the “very edge of semantic availability” (1977: 134).

If we widen the parameters of what constitutes the social or the cultural to encompass the affective dimension of human experience, we need to recalibrate the principles that guide our critical practice. Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s landmark book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performance* takes issue with some of the reigning orthodoxies of critical theory, including the prioritization of language and symbolization for interpretation, and the foregrounding of binary pairings such as nature/culture. They are especially skeptical of those theorists who unquestioningly reiterate social constructionist theories, and who only deal with affect “in the sense of rounding up affect and herding it into the big tent of what is already understood to constitute the body of Theory” (Sedgwick and Frank 109). Theory, as described by the authors, is imbued with a mind/body dualism that values human cognitive/linguistic capabilities over and against the visceral arousal that takes place in the body. This prompts social constructionist theorists to assume that “it’s the distance of any theory from a biological...basis that alone can make the possibility of doing any justice to difference (individual, historical, and cross-cultural), to contingency, to performative force, and to the possibility of change” (Sedgwick and Frank 114). According to Sedgwick and Frank, the problem with a purely cognitive/linguistic critical approach of

the sort most often utilized by cultural theorists is that “relentless attention to the structures of truth and knowledge obscures our experience of those structures” (Hemmings 553). Massumi, like Sedgwick and Frank, argues that the dogmatic acceptance of linguistic determinism creates a state of affairs in cultural theory in which “critical thinking” has become reduced to identifying points on a stable map of the always already known (Massumi 2002: 12).

Contemporary cultural critics spend too much time applying well-worn, dichotomous theories of domination and subversion to cultural texts, and too little time investigating the lived texture of these conditions. As such, critics tend to produce diagnoses of structural problems, rather than creative prescriptions that might be applied by individuals to their interpersonal, affective relations with each other. Frank comments, “in limiting the varieties of interpretation that become possible to hyper-moralized and simplified version of critique (the identification of a text as hegemonic or subversive), other performative possibilities and goals for criticism get lost” (512). Unless we recognize that language is just one link in a chain of interrelated social and physiological events that produce thought and action, our critical practice is severely limited. Massumi writes that such approaches are “incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined...What they lose, precisely, is the expression *event*—in favor of structure” (2002: 26-7). Structural critical paradigms tend to place people in opposition to one another in configurations of dominance and subjugation, whereas affect theories understand human relationships as a contagious, and contiguous, circuit of feeling and response, in which expressions of intensity are transferred to others and then double back, increasing the original intensity. This changes

the nature of how we understand the flows and maintenance of social power. As Sarah Ahmed emphasizes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, “belief and adherence to particular structures are affectively invested in, rather than cognitively weighed” (Rice 203). According to these affect theorists, our relation to ideology is not primarily intellectual, it is embodied, and affect offers a “way forward” because “affect’s difference from social structures...means it possesses, in itself, the capacity to restructure social meaning” (Hemmings 550). This is important because it adds complexity to cultural criticism that tends to inexorably move towards reductive economic explanations for cultural phenomena. It helps us to recognize that “the reality of social existence, and of lived reality, is always more complicated, filled with multiplicities and contradictions, resistance and compromises” (Grossberg 329). However, it is difficult to think and talk about such relations because “there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect” (Massumi 27).

As a corrective to perceived oversights in contemporary cultural criticism, Massumi, along with Sedgwick and Frank, sketch out the beginnings of what has recently come to be known as “affect theory,” or the “affective turn.”<sup>17</sup> In this emerging critical orientation, affects are positioned “in the pre-linguistic space between a stimulus and reaction, and between reaction and consciousness. The turn to affect is thereby a turn to that ‘non-reflective’ bodily space before thought, cognition, and representation—a space of visceral processing” (Papoulias and Callard 34), and a challenge to “any notion of cognitive primacy (Edbauer 28). The corporeal dynamism suggested by affect theory

---

<sup>17</sup> Other noteworthy contributions from scholars working within literary/cultural studies include Berlant (1999, 2005), Ahmed (2004), Brennan (2004), Hemmings (2005), Anderson (2006), Clough (2007), Thrift (2007), Gregg and Seigworth (2010).

collapses mind/body distinctions by highlighting the ways in which the social and physiological environments are mutually transformative in a materially substantive sense. Affect theories “offer tools for specifying relations between the aesthetic and the political, and between the psychic and the social, that are not only linguistic” (Frank 523) Affect is positioned as a mediatory force that joins these planes in a holistic circuit of cause and effect.

Affect theories stress the physiological and social planes with varying degrees of specificity and emphasis, though they are loosely united around the circuitous nature of affective life. Theresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* is perhaps the most *bodily* of the major works in affect theory. She argues that common social experiences, such as walking into a room and “sensing” nervous tension, are neither imaginary nor supernatural, but are in fact indications that social and physiological energies co-mingle in complex and important ways. We transmit affects between each other’s bodies in a “process whereby one person’s or one group’s nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another’s” (Brennan 9). Like much work in cultural theory, she explores the ways in which the boundaries of subjectivity are permeable, contingent, and always in flux. What makes her work unique is that she means this quite literally. As human bodies release and imbibe hormones, they physically and biologically mesh with each other and our environment: “there is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment’” (Brennan 6). Affective encounters between bodies alter our anatomical composition, and thus, sociality is not merely a matter of interpersonal communication or structural relations, it is also a matter of physiological exchange that occurs through affective encounters.

While Brennan focuses on how affect is transmitted between bodies, other affect theorists explore the circuitous relationship between bodies and technology. Beginning at least with the use of language, humans have used technologies both to train our brains and to distribute our cognition across other technical artifacts outside of our bodies. According to philosopher Andy Clark, human minds are inherently plastic, and through such everyday practices as language learning, the mind develops its cognitive powers in conjunction with its development of tools. He contends that humans are “by nature, products of a more complex and heterogeneous developmental matrix in which culture, technology, and biology are pretty well inextricably intermingled...tools and culture are indeed as much determiners of our nature as products of it” (86). Therefore, how we interact with our media technologies might be understood as an affective feedback loop. In every historical epoch, new technologies prompt new habits of mind and body that bring with them affective investments, which in turn transfigure both people’s neural networks and their interactions with each other. Richard Grusin explains that

certain affects become stronger and more muscular in different cultural and historical contexts, while others might atrophy or grow weak from disuse. Consequently, we might then seek out media and other technologies and tools and social, technical, or cultural environments in which we can continue to develop and extend certain kinds of affective states or combinations and sequences of affective states and which would then heighten or refine or attune those states and capabilities as well (9).

Such attention to the intertwined nature of history and the body helps clarify the ways in which changes in technology not only alters our relations to labor and leisure, but also transforms our capacity to perceive, think about, and *feel* these relations. For example, Pruchnic and Lacey note that “the presentation of subjective experience in media such as cinema, television, and early (‘read only’) Web formats, much like literary works, gained its representational power through mimicking common processes of human experience

and recollection. The popularity of such attempts, however...has the effect of additionally altering the 'natural' memory processes of their audiences" (2011: 7).

Of course, there is no guarantee that the affective states we choose to repeatedly pursue and therefore reinforce will necessarily be conducive to more egalitarian social and political conditions, and this is one of the problems Hemmings locates in much affect theory. She argues Sedgwick and Massumi foreground "the optimism of affective freedom" while associating the negative aspects of affective processing as part of "the pessimism of social determinism" that affect theory is supposed to free us from (551). One of these negative aspects is the fact that the "delights of consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fascism or fundamentalism, to suggest just several contexts, are affective responses that reinforce rather than challenge the dominant order" (Hemmings 551). Furthermore, Sedgwick and Massumi offer little in the way of explanation as to how we are prompted to enter into some affective circuits rather than others. For example, why do some of us feel invigorated by the fascist spectacle, while others feel a sense of threat? For affective freedom to equal critical freedom, Sedgwick must insist that affect attaches randomly to any object; she does not adequately account for the ways in which powerful institutions make some affective attachments more likely to occur than others (Hemmings 560). This is one gap in affect theory that critical rhetorical theory may help to fill by identifying how the art of persuasion is employed to draw people towards particular articulations of affects and objects.

Some critics identify a similar problem in Massumi's work. While Massumi claims that current critical interpretative practices tend to lead critics to impose a predetermined meaning on text—if your only tool is Marxist critique, you're bound to

find class struggle everywhere—he is less insightful when it comes to explaining how we are to identify and address the social forces that compel the affective relationship and imbue it with power. For Massumi the autonomy of affect places it outside the reach of critical interpretation (Hemmings 562). The language Massumi uses to describe affect—“inassimilable,” “outside expectation and adaption” (2002: 85), “in excess of any narrative or function line” (2002: 87), “irreducible excess” (2002: 87)—contributes to the practical problem of how to enlist affect theory for critical purposes. Grossberg identifies this problem in Massumi’s affect theory as a “leap from a set of ontological concepts to a description of an empirical and affective context” (314). Grossberg asserts that in order to bridge the gulf between an ontology of affect and its concrete deployment in specific cultural contexts, we must ask: “what are the machinic apparatuses or regimes of discourse that are constituting the ways in which we live our lives?” (314). Here again we find a problem for which critical rhetorical theory might provide a solution.

Pruchnic notes that because affect is often framed as “ultimately irreducible and ‘unrepresentable,’” it makes the critical edge “more what we might code ‘aesthetic’ than rhetorical, or more focused on the description of affects and affective processes rather than their possible manipulation” (2008: 167). The challenge that remains for rhetorical and cultural critics is to conceive of a way to marshal the insights of affect theory into a politically—and not just theoretically—useful critical practice. As we will see, there have been some steps in that direction, most of which find promise in the research emerging from the neurosciences about the brain’s plasticity.

Much affect theory research “has revolved around the complex parsing of cultural and subjective ‘triggers’ for affective experience in relation to the material functions and

response mechanisms of the endocrine and nervous systems” (Pruchnic 2008: 160). For instance, Connelly notes that in one form of rhetorical cultural activity, talk therapy, “specific tactics are purposely applied by others, or the actors themselves, to body/brain relays below conscious regulation,” and doing so promotes physiological changes in the neural circuitry (2002: 11). Whether it is practiced by psychoanalysts, shamans, or politicians, rhetoric can be characterized as a symbolic substance strategically administered to trigger neurochemical reactions, which produce “affective dispositions that operate below the threshold of representation and intellectual regulation alone” (Connolly 2002: 132). These affective dispositions then prompt the brain to fit them within linguistic structures that are rhetorically constituted through cultural experience.

The philosopher Mark Hansen locates emancipatory potential within the context of what he describes as “the current consensus in neuroscientific research that thinking is constructive and emergent and that it encompasses richly embodied processes of autopoietic self-organization” (593). Hansen argues that affectivity represents our best chance “to escape the pull of our embodied habits and our encultured engagement with that world: affectivity—in its transmission of intensity from one body to another—is able to undo our corporeal habits and embodied memory, and penetrate the ideological hexis (the pull of bodily habits) through which bodies are turned into subjects” (qtd. in Papoulias 34) Consciousness of our own internal neural processes allows us to decouple an affective intensity from the linguistic thought pattern to which it is usually articulated, or which produces it. This requires rigorous mental effort and is, quite literally, a form of physical training: Burkean comic criticism concretized in strategically strengthened or weakened neural networks.

As the psychiatrist and brain researcher Norman Doidge points out, “The idea that the brain is like a muscle that grows with exercise is not just a metaphor”: “postmortem examinations have shown that education increases the number of branches among neurons. An increased number of branches drives the neurons farther apart, leading to an increase in the volume and thickness of the brain (43). If we fail to intercede by way of self-conscious self-regulation, we increase our vulnerability to habits of thought and behavior that, over time, can become nearly impossible to break. This is because plasticity is competitive; “If we stop exercising our mental skills, we do not just forget them: the brain map for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead” (Doidge 58). The competitive nature of neural plasticity creates a paradox, insofar as it “the same neuroplastic properties that allow us to change our brains and produce more flexible behaviors can also allow us to produce more rigid ones,” because “neural circuits, once established, tend to become *self-sustaining*” (Doidge 242). That is, each time the plastic brain acquires culture and uses it repeatedly, there is an opportunity cost: the brain loses some neural structure, in the process, because plasticity is competitive (Doidge 298). Cultural differences are so persistent because when our native culture is learned and wired into our brains, it becomes “second nature,” seemingly as “natural” as many of the instincts we were born with (Doidge 299). Furthermore, after early adulthood, our brain’s plasticity diminishes, and the cultural orientations we’ve acquired in our developing years become more intransigent as we age. As a consequence, “the individual largely acts to alter the external world to match an increasingly inflexible inner world” (Wexler 143).

However, this is not to say we are not without agency in the matter of our mind, so to speak; while cultural habits can, over the course of a lifetime, become so strengthened at the synaptic level as to seem permanent features of our being, there are methods being developed within neuroscience that might offer clues for how critical rhetoricians may begin to think about practical interventions which work in conjunction with those strategies which target social structures. For example, in his pioneering research with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) patients, research psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz developed a method of drug-free cognitive behavioral therapy that teaches patients to “regard the intrusion of OCD symptoms into consciousness as the manifestation of a ‘false brain message,’ training them to select willfully alternative actions when experiencing obsessions and compulsions”; this allows them to relieve OCD symptoms and “bring about systematic changes in metabolic activity in the OCD circuit” (Schwartz and Begley 292). Thus, by concentrating awareness on a cognitive habit, people were able to alter the brain activity that gave rise to it. The PET scans of the OCD patients shows that “a change in the valuation a person ascribes to those electrochemical signals [that represent a thought in the neural circuits] can not only alter them in the moment but lead to such enduring changes in cerebral metabolic activity that the brain’s circuits are essentially remodeled” (Schwartz and Begley 292).

These results indicate that there is a mechanism “by which the mind might affect—indeed, in a very real sense, reclaim—the brain. That mechanism would allow volition to be real and causally efficacious, not the ‘user illusion’ that determinists call it would allow volition to act on the material brain by means of an active and purposeful choice about how to react to...conscious experience” (Schwartz and Begley 295). Within

neuroscientific literature, there is a mounting body of evidence that suggests that mental force affects the brain by “altering the wave functions of the atoms that make up the brain’s ions, neurotransmitters, and synaptic vesicles. By a direct action of mind, the brain is thus made to behave differently” (Schwartz and Begley 318). The power of cognitive-behavioral therapy to alter brain circuits in people who suffer from conditions like depression or OCD implies that similar rhetorical interventions should be able to change the circuitry that underlies other aspects of personality, behavior, and thought.

In order to begin the process of intervening into neuronal operations, individuals and collectivities must learn how these operations influence their thought, and consciously adopt techniques of deliberate self-management that run counter to the dominant ethos of American consumer capitalism: “Just Do It.” Nike’s famous slogan pithily encapsulates the widespread glorification of the self-willed affective dimension of social life. Most Americans do not like to be told to distrust their instincts, or their souls. They do, however, profess a strong interest in care of the self; Nike’s catchphrase successfully marries the impulse for self-improvement to the thrill of self-abandonment, an articulation that is, arguably, at the core of the capitalist ethos. Intervening in this dynamic may require critics to tactically mobilize the rhetoric of self-improvement and self-care for political purposes. Neurorhetorical criticism hinges on the argument that individual neuronal conditioning is simultaneously a cause and effect of socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions. By the same logic, interventions into structural problems must take into consideration the affective lives of individuals, because rational argumentation cannot occur or have impact unless people are receptive to it, and a social formation fueled on emotion, action, and certainty discourages the self-control, empathy,

and embrace of ambiguity that deliberative democracy requires. A useful critical theory of affect will seek to formulate rhetorical strategies with which to persuade people to bring their affective experience within the fold of their thought for reasons other than self-preservation alone. It is incumbent upon critical rhetoricians to articulate self-knowledge of one's own brain, its emotional triggers and vulnerabilities, to an awareness and distrust of the workings of power, which increasingly rely on rhetoric that reconfigures brains via appeals to affect.

Affect forms a crucial link between the research interests of rhetorical critics, media and cultural theorists, and neuroscientists. Jeff Pruchnic is the first rhetorical scholar to address the significance of neuroplasticity and affect for rhetorical theory. In his under-cited "Neurorhetorics: Cybernetics, Psychotropics, and the Materiality of Persuasion," he reviews mid-20<sup>th</sup> century research into cybernetics and psychotropic drugs in order to think through "the intersections between the alteration of our physiological capacities and the more traditional forces of subjective persuasion associated with the domains of rhetoric" (2008a: 169). This work is particularly useful because it explicitly challenges critical theory that rigidly insists on a strict separation of cultural and biological vectors of determination. Pruchnic notes, "cultural experiences themselves have a way of leaving a material mark on our nervous system" (2008a: 195). While Pruchnic is careful not to reduce the constitutive importance of cultural phenomena, he does submit that with the rise of virtual reality as a ubiquitous part of daily life, our affective capacities and neurological responses take on greater significance, because new media is especially geared towards producing intense bodily experiences in isolated individuals, who usually interact with online technologies in private spaces rather

than public venues. He concludes that insofar as “persuasion is increasingly taking on such forms, one of the primary challenges for ethical and rhetorical theory may be to configure neurological and affective forces as vectors of persuasion” (Pruchnic 2008a: 197). Pruchnic’s article clears a path for future rhetorical explorations of affect and neuroscience, but he is concerned primarily with increasing recognition of neuroretoric as a relevant area for future research, rather than theorizing and applying it as a critical method. I will demonstrate that neuroretoric can be a valuable critical tool for rhetoricians who wish to intervene in abuses of social power.

Political activists and social critics often feel frustrated when people stubbornly refuse to adopt alternative ways of thinking which appear, by all rational measures, more logically coherent than the “irrational” beliefs the people hold. Critical rhetoricians often frame this as a structural problem—they believe that changes in the economic and/or linguistic system will result in widespread changes in consciousness. Even worse, it is sometimes treated Platonically as a symptom of sophistry run amok, the assumption being that if the people had access to “better” information, they would naturally think and act the “right” way.<sup>18</sup> Affect theory and neuroscience might allow rhetoricians to instead consider attitudinal intransigence as a (neurochemical) drug problem, and to acknowledge that we are all—professional critics and laypeople alike—liable to become addicted to our entrenched perspectives.

---

<sup>18</sup> Lakoff’s *The Political Mind* is striking in this regard. Though he forefronts the importance of the plastic brain in political persuasion, he nevertheless implies that humans are naturally more inclined to progressive ethics and morality than they are to conservative or authoritarian models of the same, and suggests that if progressives employ the correct narratives, people will organically come around to their side.

The ancient Greeks understood rhetoric as a *pharmakon*, an ambiguous substance that could either poison or cure. With this in mind, Stephen Gencarella argues that contemporary rhetoricians should adopt the role of “social physicians,” and “attend to discouraging the arts that poison and promoting those that cure, recognizing that any critical rhetoric performed with such an agenda would necessitate discussion of how it conceives poisons and medicines” (2010: 251). The critical neurorhetoric that I am proposing understands rhetoric both literally and figuratively as a drug that can be poisonous or regenerative, and one that acts as its own antidote. In the following chapters, I will draw from critical rhetoric and neuroscience to advance a model of the critic-as-physician, but amend it with words of wisdom culled from a healer, Jesus Christ, and a dealer, Frank Lopez in *Scarface*, respectively: physician, heal thyself (but don’t get high on your own supply).

I find Gencarella’s claim a salutary prescription for what ails the field, for the medicinal metaphor he employs draws our attention to the bodily effects of the arts of persuasion. In Chapter Four, “Political Junkies: Affective Politics and Addictive Rhetoric,” I substantiate Gencarella’s metaphor with recourse to scientific knowledge concerning the neurochemistry of emotion and addiction. This chapter was motivated by my interest in the recalcitrance of ideology: why don’t people change their minds when they are presented with information that offers rational refutations of their entrenched belief systems? Burke has offered a permutation of the proposition I put forward—that we can become addicted to symbolic structures—in his writings on “piety,” but Burke did not account for the neurobiology of affect and addiction, and thus he ultimately insists that habits are constituted in discourse. Reliance on Burkean theory has prompted

many rhetorical critics to feel secure in their belief that the introduction of new discursive frames will prompt people to rethink their ideological habits. I do not share their confidence, and I read Burkean piety through neuroscientific concepts such as Antonio Damasio's "somatic markers" and Susan Greenfield's insights concerning neuronal communication to show that ideological messages delivered through emotionally charged rhetoric give the brain access to neurochemical caches that it finds addicting. The brain, physiologically constituted through addiction, filters social-symbolic inputs through a screen that separates that which satisfies its cravings, and that which does not. This has political implications, because rhetoric that is formatted to meet the needs of the junkie brain will be more influential than rhetoric designed to appeal to a subject's rational, intellectual faculties. I argue that critical work that focuses on replacing bad ideas with better ideas via rhetorical activity is often destined to be in vain unless it involves the body as well as the mind. Fascist regimes and addiction recovery groups intuit this, and I recommend that rhetoricians look to Alcoholic's Anonymous as a model for critical and pedagogical practices that seek to help people overcome addiction to ideology.

In "Political Junkies," I suggest that agency is neither centered in the conscious mind, nor is it a singular quality—there is not "one agent per body." Rather, the brain and body can make decisions independently of the will of the thinking subject. This is why addicts so often struggle with relapse: what the subject thinks and what the brain-body wants are often at odds, and the latter constellation of agencies is capable of overriding cognitive agency. I explore the dispersal of agency in greater detail in Chapter Five, "Vital Signs: Consubstantiality and Corporeal Agencies." My point of departure is Burke's theory of identification, which he insists is "a symbolic act that...remains

available for conscious critique and reasoned adjustment” (Davis 2008: 124). Within critical rhetoric, the notion that we can empower people with the ability to willfully de-articulate the identifications that bind them to ideological structures by equipping them with “critical consciousness” is attributable in large part to Burkean approaches to cultural criticism, combined with a humanistic optimism about the possibility of human emancipation that survived the ascendancy of post-humanistic thought in the field, such as that represented by Derrida, Foucault, and Butler. Agency, according to many humanist rhetoricians, is bound up with the subject’s ability to say “no” to power. In this chapter, I question whether humanist theories of agency can be sustained if there are many instances when the mind says “no,” but the body says “yes.” To illustrate, I discuss V.S. Ramachandran’s innovative treatment of people who suffer from phantom limb syndrome. His methods circumvent the conscious mind and “speak” directly to the brain. Based on the neurological principles that undergird Ramachandran’s work, I argue that critical rhetoricians should pay greater attention to the agencies of brain and body that often pass without recognition in rhetorical studies. I urge critics to engage with the “New Vitalism,” an emerging philosophical and critical orientation that helps us rethink agency “not as an essential characteristic of the rational subject, a deity or some vital force, but as those contingent capacities for reflexivity, creative disclosure, and transformation that emerge...within the folds and reversals of material/meaningful flesh” (Coole 113).

Understanding agency as “contingent capacities” emphasizes their precarious nature: the agencies of the body are vulnerable to manipulation by cultural and rhetorical forces that often remain hidden from the light of critical inquiry. In Chapter Six, “An

Uncritical Condition: Rhetorical Violence and ‘Brain Trauma,’” I call attention to these vulnerabilities. I argue that the traditional distinction between rhetoric and physical force cannot be maintained in light of what we now know about the effects violent rhetorics have on the brain and body. Rhetoricians tend to focus their criticism on the damage that vitriolic speech can do to a subject’s sense of self; the sense of self is usually considered a socially constructed narrative structure, housed in the psyche, that subjects call upon to impose order and meaning on experience. If we understand identity only as a symbolic construct, it follows that violent rhetoric cannot physically wound a person; it can only function as a precursor to, or inspiration for, physical acts that may produce physical wounds. For humanists, the moment of agency can occur in the temporal gap between the reception of rhetoric, and the physical act it engenders. It is in this moment that a subject either decides to reject the meaning of the message directed towards him, or respond to it with violence. I contend that theories which frame agency as a singular mental event—a critical moment of judgment—fail to account for the pre-conscious neurophysiological operations that determine whether or not a subject is capable of engaging in critical thought. These operations can be disrupted by symbolic forms of trauma that have material, bodily effects that are invisible to the naked eye, but that nevertheless directly affect a subject’s ability to make critical cognitive judgments. I propose that the primary scene of violence, then, often occurs before the outward acts of aggression that so often garner the disapproval and concern of critics and commentators. Lynette Hunter notes that, among other things, rhetoric can be violence if “someone is systematically denied access to particular information,” if “ideology constitutes the representations of a subject to ensure the inadequacy of that representation,” and if “there is a different power relation

between two people or groups, in terms of their access to knowledge, political, economic, cultural, social structures that the powerful keep obscure/renders obscure, by say not informing someone of their rights” (6-7). In a similar vein, I make the case that when searching for the parties “responsible” for violence, we should look towards institutional power rather than individual judgments. My contribution is a theory of violence that allows activists and critics to substantiate claims that power oppresses through symbolic violence by demonstrating that symbolic violence is not a *substitute* for physical coercion; at the level of neurology, symbolic violence *is* physical violence.

I conclude this dissertation with some recommendations for possible future applications of critical neurorhetoric. Critical neurorhetoric can update and add depth to rhetorical theories of the body and embodiment, but it can also be employed as a pedagogical practice. I argue that rhetoric and composition instructors should focus less on teaching students to perform textual analyses of cultural products, and more on guiding students through the process of analyzing their own affective responses as texts that have been produced by their immersion in social practices. The advantage, I believe, is that students can become aware of their lack of agential self-control, when that term is understood as one that encompasses both intellectual and visceral registers of response. Critical neurorhetoric insists that cognition is but one of many sites of rhetorical influence and production; when we recognize the limits of our power to refuse the dictates of rhetoric, we can begin to formulate strategies and tactics which may allow us to envision and pursue new ways of being.

## CHAPTER 4

### **POLITICAL JUNKIES: AFFECTIVE POLITICS AND ADDICTIVE RHETORIC**

Rhetorical critics traditionally begin their investigations with the unspoken assumption that subjects are persuaded by the ideational quality of an argument, and critical evaluations are focused on determining the reasons why particular arguments are meaningful to context-bound audiences. Yet one context that often passes without comment is that of the neural-makeup of the message-receivers. This is due to a long-standing tendency within rhetorical studies to draw distinctions between externalized, public, and cognitive modes of communication such as speaking and reading, and internal, physiological, unconscious operations that occur outside of or prior to an agent's intellectual apprehension. The former category is often taken to be the proper site of rhetorical inquiry, whereas the latter is understood as the province of psychologists and scientists. Contemporary rhetoricians have been hesitant to engage with the pre-conscious and unconscious realm for fear of lapsing into the sort of reductionism exemplified by behaviorism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and the like. However, in fending off one type of reductionism, many rhetorical and cultural theorists "fall into another: they lapse into a reductionism that ignores how biology is mixed into thinking and culture and how other aspects of nature are folded into both" (Connolly 2002: 3).

In "The Philosophical Basis of Rhetoric," Henry W. Johnstone Jr. draws a distinction between "the persuasion that is the legitimate concern of rhetoric and the persuasion that is not" by asserting that "it is natural to draw the line in terms of the evocation of consciousness for purposes of communication" (25). A persuasive process

such as “subliminal stimulation” deliberately “avoids consciousness” and persuades by “*causing* a state of consciousness rather than *evoking* one” (Johnstone Jr. 25). Johnstone works from the presumption, commonly held among rhetoric scholars, that traditional forms of rhetoric, such as oratory or literature, fundamentally operate in the mind differently than less artful forms of persuasion, such as “coercion at gunpoint” or “brainwashing” (25). Such a view “assumes we can separate the un- or sub-conscious from the conscious, the intentional from the unintentional, the explicit from the implicit, the discursive from the non-discursive” (Gregg 51). These delineations “will not do” because “[I]nsofar as anything has meaning for us, it will have meaning in accord with the principle” of brain operations (Gregg 51). All of our interactions with the world, whether they are intentional or accidental, willed into being or foisted upon us, alter the wiring of our brains, and our identities “largely develop from cognitive and affective activities that are only marginally within conscious control” (Thiele 281). Moreover, these affective and neurological activities make significant contributions to the processes of identification and judgment that form the bedrock of rhetorical studies.

By focusing primarily on the public exchange of symbols, and the ways these transactions reshape the social and political landscape, rhetoricians often miss the intermediary step that takes place in the body’s interior, between the moment a visual or linguistic cue is apprehended by a subject, and the point at which that cue is registered in conscious thought. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes:

By the time you get ‘delivery’ of consciousness for a given object, things have been ticking away in the machinery of your brain for what would seem like an eternity to a molecule—if molecules could think. We are always hopelessly late for consciousness and because we all suffer from the same tardiness no one notices it. (1999: 127)

Although we are not aware of this half-second gap between reception and cognitive apprehension, what occurs in this pre-reflective space has profound implications for how we interpret and act on that which we perceive. Critical work that ignores this space will have trouble keeping pace with powerful political and economic institutions that have fine-tuned rhetorical techniques which aim specifically to circumnavigate the intellect and target those regions of the human that are most vulnerable to suggestion. These institutions know that if you want to change people's minds, you have appeal to their emotions.

The political media system has long ceased to attempt to provide the public with reasonably unbiased information, or to act as a forum for civil debate. Instead, with few exceptions, it has become divided into partisan camps. Each camp tends to disseminate narratives that will satisfy the expectations of its ideologically invested audience, and does so in a performative style characterized by displays of indignation and outrage, creating what satirist Jon Stewart incisively calls a "cyclonic perpetual emotion machine." Based on what science tells us about the ways in which affect diminishes abstract reasoning, entrenches memory, and influences judgment, we might expect that an emotionally charged media environment will have widespread effects on people's capacity to thoughtfully engage in a deliberative democracy. We might therefore also expect the science of rhetoric to be a source of great interest to rhetoricians, but so far, this has not been the case.

The field of rhetorical studies persists in largely restricting its criticism only to those aspects of experience that people can consciously recognize within themselves and perceive in others. That which cannot be publicly observed and articulated is often

considered “pre-rhetorical-and-unfounded” (Cherwitz qtd. in Gregg 12). Bodies and bodily processes, especially those related to affect and the preconscious or unconscious, are frequently considered “antithetical to rhetoric’s disciplinary touchstones: argument, persuasion, and reason” (Hawhee 2009: 177). This attitude props up a fantasy that politics and society “could, or should consist of deliberation alone,” and encourages critical work that treats “subliminal influences as if they were reducible to modes of manipulation or behavioral management to be overcome in a rational and deliberative society” (Connolly 2002: 17). The establishment of a more deliberative, democratic society is, I believe, a worthwhile macropolitical goal, but it is a goal whose achievement cannot be willed into being by good intentions alone. If we are to establish a more democratic and deliberative society, we must first attend to the micropolitics of the brain and body. This entails paying close attention to the forces that promote or inhibit each individual’s capacity to think critically and creatively, and to conceive of alternative modes of living.

For rhetorical critics, this requires recognition of the *compositional* aspects of the brain-body-culture matrix that work in a feedback loop with the representational and symbolic aspects of culture. By compositional, I mean the way in which “thinking helps to shape and consolidate brain connections, corporeal dispositions, habits, and sensibilities” (Connolly 2002: 1). It is commonplace within rhetorical studies that rhetoric is “constitutive”; that is, rhetors address and attempt to “call into being” a people by providing them with a narrative with which they can identify as a collectivity. In so doing, “individual acts and experiences” become “identified with a ‘community,’” a term that “mask or negates tensions and differences between member in any society”

(Charland 1987: 140). While rhetoricians have exhaustively elaborated upon the many way identities and ideologies come to be *imaginatively* embodied by social groups, much less critical writing has targeted the processes by which identities and ideologies come to be *physiologically* embodied by individuals.

While some theorists have gestured in this general direction—we might here recall Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” and Kenneth Burke’s ideas concerning “consubstantiality” and “piety”—very few have ventured beyond an understanding of “embodied” as referring to a set of outwardly observable behaviors, or to particular cognitively-held attitudes and orientations. Much cultural and rhetorical criticism has focused on social transformation by way of discursive substitution: the guiding presumption is that if we exchange one set of terms and ideas for another, alterations in thought and action will follow. This overlooks the barriers, deeply embedded in corporeal tissue and synaptic networks, which might prevent people from accepting linguistic substitutions. The purpose of this essay is to draw from affect theory and recent neuroscience in order to bring to light some of the hidden forces which inhibit critical thinking, consolidate identity formation, and make it especially difficult to change people’s minds.

### **Affect and the Brain**

From the perspective of neurobiology, the origins of rhetorical influence can be located in neurological processes that trigger the release of naturally occurring chemicals in the brain when individuals are confronted with exciting stimuli, causing prelinguistic experiences of affective intensity which are then translated into conscious thought. As

thoughts are linguistically represented in consciousness, and re-represented in public rhetorical performances, physiological modifications occur in the brain that play an important role in determining the subject's capacity to accept, evaluate, and create other rhetorical propositions.

Neuroscientist Michael Merzenich explains that our brain "is modified on a substantial scale, physically and functionally" each time we learn a new skill, develop a new ability, rehearse an idea, or invoke a memory (qtd. in Doidge 298). The neural circuits that represent these things, once established, tend to become self-sustaining: each time they are activated, they become stronger, and the ideas and attitudes they represent become more prominent as interpretive schema. They create particular dispositions that guide thought and action by attaching emotional significance to cultural objects and phenomena. Damasio calls these dispositions "somatic markers." A somatic marker is a "culturally mobilized, corporeal disposition through which affect-imbued, preliminary orientations to perception and judgment scale down the material factored into cost-benefit analyses, principled judgments, and reflective experiments" (Connolly 2002: 35). Somatic markers automatically draw from our affective memories of past experiences to help us quickly make sense of the present. At an unconscious level of calculation, they winnow down the possible reactions we may have to new contingencies. If in the past we had very bad experiences with dogs, or grew up in a household in which dogs were routinely defamed, the next time we encounter a dog on the street, we will automatically tense up and feel panic. After a few seconds we may be able to consciously will ourselves to stand our ground and intellectually quell our anti-dog prejudice, but the brain and body will make the preliminary judgment, against which the conscious mind must appeal.

Affect is ubiquitous; all thoughts are invested to a greater or lesser degree with affect, because the regions of the brain most responsible for cognition (the prefrontal cortex) and those most responsible for the generation of affect (the amygdala and the limbic system) are intertwined and inextricable from each other, and with every other brain function.<sup>19</sup> The very idea of “dispassionate judgment” is oxymoronic, as Nietzsche foretold. However, some acts of judgment are more clear-minded than others, and we can intervene in, or redirect, our own neurochemical processes so as to regulate the extent to which we are in the thrall of affective impulses that are outside of our intellectual governance. Before we explore how rhetorical techniques might play a role in that effort, we should first consider how certain kinds of affectively-charged stimuli trigger particular neuronal conditions, which in turn set the parameters of what is thinkable.

Neuroscientists theorize that elevated affective states are evolutionary survival and procreative mechanisms that produce simpler, more efficient patterns of brain functioning by temporarily reducing the levels of neuronal connectivity between different brain regions, so that the agent’s attention is singularly focused on the immediate event. In a state of pleasure, or anger, or fear, our cognitive depth and breadth is dramatically reduced, and we are therefore incapable of sustained or complex critical thought—we are inclined to act on the impulses of the moment, without regard to long-term consequences, because in our evolutionary past, the extra time it takes to weigh consequences could mean the difference between life and death. Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield explains,

---

<sup>19</sup> It is virtually impossible to fully capture in words the complexity of neural relays and feedback loops. Consider this quote from neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux concerning the brain’s response to threat as an indication of this complexity: “When the amygdala detects danger, it sends messages to the pituitary gland, and the result is the release of a hormone called ACTH. ACTH flows through the blood to the adrenal gland to cause the release of steroid hormone. In addition to reaching target sites in the body, the steroid hormone flows through the blood into the brain, where it binds to the receptors in the hippocampus, amygdala, prefrontal cortex, and other regions” (2008: 280).

“In evolutionary terms, we can view emotions as processes where one is highly interactive with the environment. If you are interactive with the environment, then you are focusing on your senses, and the more you are focusing on your senses, the less you are accessing the mind. The more you do this, the more you are letting go of the self” (49).

Each variety of emotion prompts the brain and body to prepare to respond to events in a different manner. Drawing from what psychologists call the “action tendencies” of emotions, Condit explains that “there are rough clusters or ‘suites’ of body responses that include particular biochemical reactions and these clusters include different predispositions toward vague trajectories of action—aggression, withdrawal, sociality, self-focus” (“Action! How Emotions Move the Body”). Critical rhetoricians should consider this noteworthy, because in order “to predict how a text will matter in a social formation, one has to attend to the specific types of bodily arousal (‘emotions’) that discourse encourages” (“Action! How Emotions Move the Body”). Anger, for example, is an emotion that is confrontational and collectivizing. A rhetor who wants to rally a nation to war would be wise to employ rhetoric designed to evoke anger, rather than rhetoric intended to make people feel afraid, because anger triggers a very different action tendency (tribal aggression), than does fear.

In contrast to anger, fear anchors us in the present, and focuses our thoughts on our individual needs. The title of an article in a social psychology journal pithily captures the difference between the two affective dispositions: “Anger Wants a Fight and Fear Wants ‘Them’ to Go Away” (Skitka et al). Furthermore, as research by Daniel A. Miller and colleagues has shown, fear is a powerful inhibitor of collective action. Fear is most

effective when a rhetor aims to compel complacency or paralysis in an audience.

When the brain is focused on stimuli that arouses anger or fear, its circuits work to “keep attention focused on the threatening situation” at the expense of higher order cognitive functions such as self-reflexive thought, because “in order for the amygdala to respond” to threat, “the prefrontal region has to be shut down” (LeDoux 2002: 228, 217). The brain ceases activation of any region that is not immediately needed to fend off or flee from the problem at hand. Threat response involves a “hostile takeover of consciousness by emotion” (LeDoux 2002: 226). It is difficult to think clearly under conditions of threat because the brain regions responsible for reflective, critical thought temporarily take a back seat to the primordial brain areas that control flight or flight responses.

Practices and rituals that make us feel pleasure, such as sexual coupling, dances, and political rallies, all involve a sublimation of individuality caused by the dampening of general neuronal communication, coupled with the intensification of the activity of a few specific neural networks. The flood of neurotransmitters that produces pleasure puts brain cells on alert, making them more receptive to signals from other neurons. Consequently, our receptivity to sensual interactions with the environment and other people is increased, but our cognitive capacity is reduced. This is why in moments of intense pleasure, such as ecstatic trance or orgasm, the flood of stimulation largely cancels out self-reflexivity. A rhetor who wants to strengthen communal bonds by fostering intragroup intimacy will probably want to use a rhetoric of pleasure.

Anger, fear, and pleasure all induce a state of “mindlessness,” because they all involve a reduction and concentration of communication between neurons. We become childlike and less sophisticated in our thinking while under the influence of affective intensity because in our brains, as in a child’s brain, there is “only a modest degree of connectivity between neurons. Although lines of communication might be potentially available in the adult brain, they can be temporarily out of service, like telephone lines that actually are in place but are simply not being used” (Greenfield 79). As a result, we become “upset or excited by minor, meaningless events, and very vulnerable to suggestions and to literal images, without the ability to buffer experiences with reason” (Greenfield 88). An emotional audience is an audience neurologically formatted to be uniquely attuned to rhetoric, and receptive to persuasion.

Humans almost universally crave a state of mindlessness—diminished neuronal connectivity, whether achieved through the efficient administration of anger (footage of enemy combatants desecrating American bodies, locker room pep talks), fear (horror movies, roller coasters, haunted houses), or pleasure (pornography, dancing, recreational drugs) is compelling, and attractive, because it focuses us in the here and now, and in so doing, reduces anxiety about, and the imperative to plan for, the future. As the lyrics to decades’ worth of pop songs attest, we all long to “lose ourselves,” or “get out of our minds” from time to time. We get there by shutting down the lines of communication between neurons, and concentrating activity in just a few remaining open circuits. Greenfield explains that the “more we feel, the less we are, literally, ourselves—the less we are encumbered by previous, idiosyncratic associations that personalize the brain into the mind” (14).

Mindlessness may be achieved through the administration of symbolic/representational inducements, such as images or speech, or via material/somatic means, such as narcotics or ritualized movements. The form the input takes has little bearing upon the brain-body's reaction to it. The brain-body translates all incoming stimuli into neurochemicals, and, likewise, all outgoing expressions begin as neurochemical operations. This includes rhetoric. Rhetorical messages "arrive via physical means, and are associated with complex webs of connotations (positive and negative affects), which are also physically instantiated" (Condit 2000: 19). When rhetoric enters the body through the eyes or ears, it catalyzes chemical reactions in the brain that impact our capacity to think about what we see or hear. Emotionally charged rhetoric is particularly potent because it unleashes neurochemical caches that subdue the critical sentries posted in the prefrontal cortex.

These same neurochemical processes also make emotionally charged rhetorical encounters especially memorable, and influential. LeDoux informs us that "because more brain systems are typically active during emotional than nonemotional states, and the intensity of arousal is greater, the opportunity for coordinated learning across brain systems is greater during emotional states. By coordinating parallel plasticity throughout the brain, emotional states promote the development and unification of the self" (2002: 322). We are more apt to remember events that happen in states of high affective arousal because it is evolutionarily advantageous to learn very quickly which situations are dangerous and to be avoided, and which are beneficial to survival and to be sought again. Therefore, our brains have adapted the ability to immediately store this information, and automatically reach for it when confronted with similar stimuli in the future. This

explains why emotional events become almost permanently seared in our memory, while we struggle to recall the mundane interactions of everyday life. It follows, then, that rhetoric delivered in highly emotional contexts will be more transformative than rhetorical exchanges conducted with dispassionate civility.

To review: emotional rhetoric is appealing because it offers mindlessness, persuasive because mindlessness deadens skepticism and critical thought, and constitutive because emotion ushers rhetorical messages past the fickle working memory, directly into long-term memory.<sup>20</sup> Thus ensconced, it continues to shape perception and interpretation of experience long after the initial rhetorical event has passed.

### **Addictive Politics**

Rhetoric scholars are apt to employ linguistic schema such as Burke's terministic screens, rather than affective-corporeal theories such as Damasio's somatic markers, to explain how our perceptions of objects and events are conditioned by cultural experience. However, when put in conversation, the two theories can enrich each other, because language is encoded in biological scripts in the plastic brain. Terministic screens are mental operations that select aspects of reality that fit into the ideological worldview one has adopted, and deflect aspects of reality that contradict it (Burke 1966: 45). An understanding of the relationship between affect, memory, and language helps to explain why the brain selects one set of terministic screens over other possible screens.

---

<sup>20</sup> My use of the term "constitutive" here subtly differs from the way it is employed by Charland (1987) and other critical rhetoricians. Constitutive rhetoric traditionally refers to the way subjects are interpellated into ideological formations through the rhetorical narratives with which they identify. I am claiming that emotional rhetoric is *especially* constitutive because it breaks down subjects' potential resistance to these ideological narratives.

While we may be intellectually cognizant of the possibility of multiple perspectives on reality, we do not consciously weigh each perspective's viability every time we encounter a new event or object, and then choose which one we wish to hold up to the influx of experience. Instead, our brain chooses for us according to internalized somatic markers, and delimits the parameters of the field of cognitive thought on which we will subsequently play. When confronted with words or symbols that have become deeply entrenched through repetition or emotion, reflexive memory takes over, draws on intuitions, and bypasses brain regions responsible for reason and critical thought. Science writer Chris Mooney explains how this influences political thought:

Memory, as embodied in the brain, is conceived of as a network, made up of nodes and linkages between them, and what occurs after an emotional reaction is called spreading activation. As you begin to call a subject to mind (like Sarah Palin) from your long-term memory, nodes associated with that subject ("woman," "Republican," "Bristol," "death panels," "Paul Revere") are activated in a fanlike pattern—like a fire that races across a landscape but only burns a small fraction of the trees. And subconscious and automatic emotion starts the burn. It therefore determines what the conscious mind has available to work with—to argue with.

The brain makes this determination based on which conclusion will deliver a jolt of neurochemical stimulation, or, in other words, which will immediately produce a satisfying affective outcome. Bruce Wexler writes, "Consonance between internal and external structure is experienced as pleasurable, while dissonance is an unpleasant source of psychophysiological tension" (144). The brain will often construct perceptions and interpretations of events that reinforce its preconceived notions, because doing triggers the release of neurochemicals it craves. This is often at odds with intellectual concerns, such as ethics, reason, or logic. We must here recall that what is "satisfying" to the brain is not synonymous with what makes us "happy" or "joyous," nor is it necessarily connected to securing a happy future. Rather, it is the pure physiological arousal that

comes from a flood of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, an arousal manifested in a mental state of reduced cognition—mindlessness.

With repeated exposure to a politics of mindlessness, the brain is reconstituted, via somatic markers, in such a way as to automatically “screen out” alternative models of political discourse. This may explain why the emotional political rhetoric emanating from media outposts such as *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Hannity*, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, and *The Ed Show* garner higher ratings and exert greater influence on the culture than more deliberative, thoughtful programs like *The Jim Lehrer NewsHour* and *Charlie Rose*.

One of the more “striking and unsettling conclusions derived from research into physiological and affective functioning in relation to politics” is that “automatic or even ‘machinic’ processes” in the brain and body “drive the majority of political behavior” (Pruchnic 2008: 171). For example, neurological studies of political partisanship indicate that the greater immersion one has in the political media, the less critical one becomes. Furthermore, after repeated exposure to affectively charged political rhetoric, the brain becomes addicted to the state of simplistic thinking, or mindlessness, that it achieves via the neurochemical flows this rhetoric induces. In order to feed its addiction, the brain actively rejects information that might prompt it to change its ways.

In a series of brain scans of political partisans who were asked to consider “obviously” contradictory statements by the politicians they supported, Dr. Drew Westen found that partisans’ brains reverted to the comfort zone of long-held biases—they could easily identify the contradictions in the statements made by the opposition’s candidate, or

by neutral figures such as actors, but when it came to politicians they supported, they failed to perceive the contradiction. This result held true with both Republicans and Democrats. What was most surprising, though, was that these acts of willful ignorance gave people a neurochemical buzz. Westen writes

Once partisans had found a way to reason to false conclusions, not only did neural circuits involved in negative emotions turn off, but circuits involved in positive emotions turned on. *The partisan brain didn't seem satisfied in just feeling better. It worked overtime to feel good, activating reward circuits that give partisans a jolt of positive reinforcement for their biased "reasoning."* These reward circuits overlap substantially with those activated when drug addicts get their "fix," giving new meaning to the term *political junkie*. (xiv, emphasis in original)

The "political junkie" is colloquial designation that, if taken literally instead of figuratively, offers insight into the ways in which ideological beliefs become embodied and intransigent.<sup>21</sup> For the addict, the appeal of the substance to which he is addicted comes from the substance's capacity to reduce cognition and critical thinking—this appears to be true whether the substance in question is speed or speech. As addiction deepens, the addict's ability and willingness to be "talked out of" his compulsive behavior declines. An outside observer of the addict's situation may inform him that certain drugs or ideas are bad for him, and present him with facts, figures, and case studies that testify to the veracity of this argument, but such efforts are likely to be in vain, because the addict does not suffer from confusion, he is in the thrall of certainty, and his certainty is reinforced each time he is exposed to the substance.

Habituated engagement with any substance, be it material or symbolic, can produce a state of addiction in which the user loses the critical capacity to make reasoned judgments concerning all matters related to the substance. The addict eventually develops

---

<sup>21</sup> For another, similar neuroscientific exploration of "political junkies," see Iacoboni (2008).

a tolerance to the high it produces, and consequently he requires increasingly elevated levels of stimulation in order to maintain equilibrium, and experiences disorientation and agitation if the substance is withdrawn. Doidge explains that tolerance “can develop in happy lovers as they get used to each other” just as it develops in a drug user. This is because all addictions, be they to symbolic substances or material substances, are established by the brain’s ever-increasing hunger for the neurotransmitter dopamine, and “[D]opamine likes novelty” (Doidge 116). This means that the stakes must be constantly raised in order to stave off withdrawal—the addict needs more intense quantities or qualities of the substance. If the substance in question is emotional political rhetoric, the craving may be satisfied by increasingly hyperbolic and incendiary expressions of terror and rage. Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, both recovering drug addicts, refashion themselves as drug dealers, ingeniously adept at feeding the cravings of conservative political junkies.

The neurochemistry of dopamine fuels the system in our brain that is related to *appetitive* excitement, the sort of stimulation we feel when we imagine something that we desire. This affective tension evoked by the appetitive system is different from the feeling triggered by the *satisfaction* of desire, such as we experience after sex or a good meal. The neurochemistry of satisfaction is based on endorphins, which are chemically related to opiates such as heroin and morphine. Endorphins produce a peaceful, euphoric state; they mark the cessation of desire.

Verbal and visual symbols that are strategically employed in such a way as to specifically induce the appetitive excitation associated with anticipatory desire are the common vernacular of a consumer society. We routinely see such symbols in political

and commercial marketing. These symbols highlight the disjuncture between what we are, and what we desire to be, while positing an elusive but theoretically attainable object as the thing that will satisfy our exciting longing.

The rhetorical forms that deliver the sought-after rush are those which construct a cathartic structure in which homeostatic equilibrium is (paradoxically, and problematically) “achieved” by its own perpetual deferral. Addiction to political rhetoric, like drug addiction, is premised on desire that cannot be definitively consummated, so that the thrill of the pursuit becomes an end in itself, and overwhelms the supposed purpose of democratic discourse: the relatively peaceable negotiation and resolution of partisan differences. If we were to be playfully reductive, we might say that an ideal democracy would run on endorphins, but the democracy we have is addicted to dopamine. Because bipartisan resolution would promise a cessation of the high delivered by the excess affect that characterizes conflict, the perception of conflict must be assiduously maintained through the rhetorical construction of new divisions if corporate media outlets and political institutions wish to keep their customers “happy,” which is to say, euphorically unhappy, and craving more.

### **The Drugs of Rhetoric**

Those who fear its influence often treat rhetoric as a dangerous drug. Perhaps there is good reason for this. Rhetoric, like certain pharmacological substances, induces physiological events in the brain that determine our susceptibility to suggestion and our capacity for critical thought. Suggesting a connection between language and drugs, deconstructionist philosopher Avital Ronell “points out that when we borrow the words

of others to make ourselves understood, we enter a realm of what we could call ‘Being-on-language’” (Davis 74). Ronell argues that “[T]here is no Being that is not possessed, thrown, animated by one ‘drug’ or another” (Davis 75). This provocative claim becomes more concrete if we ground it in the insights of neuroscience, which tell us that all social and environmental stimuli are translated into neurochemicals when apprehended by human subjects. If we accept that we cannot think ourselves onto an epistemological plane that exists outside of rhetoric (for thought itself is rhetorical), than we might consider as well that we cannot rhetoricize ourselves outside of the realm of drugs (for our capacity to perceive, think about, and produce rhetoric depends upon the neurochemical reactions which occur within our brains).

Arguably, the appeal of any rhetorical encounter, be it oratory or literature, is its capacity to transport us out of the world of rationality, and into plane of existence usually characterized with the diaphanous language of “the soul,” “the imagination,” or “inspiration.” Rhetoricians often attribute this aspect of rhetoric's power to *phantasia*, the capacity through which images of stimuli past, passing, or to come are generated and made present (Kennerly). When rhetoric promises a movement away from the body and its desires, such an “uplifting” speech or “transcendent” performance, it often carries a positive valence. However, when literary or oratorical language excites the body, instead of the soul or the mind, and stokes desire in ways that threaten the dominant moral order, it is often treated juridically as drug (Ronell 55).

Ronell offers as example the case of James Joyce’s sexually explicit and at times scatological novel *Ulysses*, which was “distilled down to its essence as a drug” in the collective imagination of the American public that feared the effects its frank depiction of

natural bodily processes would have on vulnerable minds (55). *Ulysses* was allowed to enter the United States only when a court of law determined it was an “emetic formula” rather than an “aphrodisiac philter” (Ronell 55)—that is, when it decided the novel’s imagery was more likely to induce readers to feel disgusted by, instead of attracted to, the human body’s desires and functions. Similar legal determinations were made in reference to William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, other literary works that confront without moral condemnation the primal aspects of human corporeal life. These cases lead Ronell to conclude that “[L]iterature is most exposed when it stops representing, that is, when it ceases veiling itself with the excess that we commonly call meaning” (56). When language is stripped of its meaning function, we see that it serves us very much like a drug, causing physical pleasure or pain, inciting desires for sex or violence or empathy that we didn’t know we possessed, and that we might disavow in the public realm.

For instance, film theorist Linda Williams’s work on the “body genres” of horror, pornography, and melodrama identifies forms of visual rhetoric designed to induce bodily states rather than evoke meaning. According to Williams, “the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen” (704-705). The “body” in “body genres” refers to both the physiological mechanism of response in the spectator’s body, and to the representational spectacle of the terrified, aroused, or anguished bodies depicted on the screen. These genres are widely considered “low art,” or even morally dangerous, because they circumvent the spectator’s critical mind—presumed to be the seat of moral conscience and judgment—and operate directly on the affective body, compelling physical reactions that the

spectator has not cognitively authorized, and thereby calling into question the locus of the spectator's agency.

Both pharmacological and rhetorical intoxicants “thematize the dissociation of autonomy and responsibility” (Ronell 59); they shed light on the fallacy of agency by revealing the limits of our control over our own thoughts and actions. These substances act as “a radically nomadic parasite let loose from the will of language” (Ronell 52). A scapegoated substance—be it “obscene” literature, socialist ideology, or marijuana—is often framed as the cause, rather than the effect, of “dangerous” desires. Attending to this moralistic discourse is a widespread conviction that the subtraction of the substance from society would eradicate people's desire for the state of mindless communion or identification with Otherness that the substance provides to them. But the historical record indicates this is never the case. Humans are addicted to mindlessness and communion, and relentlessly seek out substances and experiences that will help them to achieve those states.

Moral and political authorities are not opposed to all form of mindless intoxication, only those forms of it that do not promote the preservation of their power. As Ronell points out, “anything can serve the function of a drug” (53); in American society, if one is addicted to labor, or to religion, one is congratulated for his or her work ethic, or spirituality. If, however, one is addicted to sexual pleasure or marijuana, he or she may be socially ostracized or imprisoned. “Drugs” is a floating signifier that can be attached to anything which is to be marked for regulation or prohibition.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, that which escapes classification as a drug may still have drug effects, and addictive

---

<sup>22</sup> See Derrida (1993)

qualities. Ronell writes, “Detached from the strictly determined referent, addiction can...hanker after a mystified communion of community, a mythology of ‘Volk’ or even economy, which is why one is also susceptible to becoming intoxicated with any regime of reunification” (42). Here is where the neurology of addiction intersects with rhetoric and ideology. If emotional rhetoric is an addictive drug that sets off brain operations that result in a reduction of neuronal connectivity, thus creating an unsophisticated, child-like mental state in those under its influence, it follows that rhetoric junkies will be more uncritically receptive to authoritarian figures and hierarchical forms of social organization.

Klaus Theweleit’s classic two-volume study of 20<sup>th</sup> century German fascism, *Male Fantasies*, provides valuable insight into the affective dynamics of political rhetoric. Theweleit writes, “it was through speeches” that the fascist movement was disseminated, “thus an analysis of the situation of the speech is crucial if we are to understand the expansion of popular support for Nazism” (118). Theweleit undertakes an exhaustive review of fascist soldiers’ writing, and notices that “[H]ardly a single novel or biography by any of the soldier fascists fails to detail some experience of conversion through oratory” (119). What’s remarkable is that these men “write exclusively of the speech’s effect on their emotions,” rather than the ideas or specific words expressed in the speeches” (120). Of all the autobiographies Theweleit surveys, virtually none of the writers “considers it important to report what the leader has actually said”; instead, the writers describe being “carried away by inspiration” (121).

Consider the language Joseph Goebbels uses in his novel *Michael* to describe the experience of a fascist public speech. The main protagonist reports, “I had no knowledge

of what was happening inside me”; “I was driven”; “almost out of my mind”; “intoxicated”; “What happened then, I cannot say” (qtd. in Theweleit 122). Descriptions of political speeches in German fascist literature almost invariably take place first on a pre- or extra-linguistic affective plane, and only secondarily is the ineffable experience articulated to conscious thought about ideological structures. Identifications between the subject and the speaker “can be achieved only *in opposition to* consciousness. Whenever thresholds are crossed—the ubiquitous thresholds of prohibitions across the body, thresholds of defense and control, thresholds of fear before the regions of the unknown—the transition takes place in a state of trance, intoxication, or miracle” (Theweleit 127). The fascists about whom Theweleit writes aren’t gradually acquiring a new language with which to frame reality; they are undergoing an ontological transformation rooted in the body and nurtured by affect.

The fascist speech was not said to provide information that spectators found intellectually convincing; it was said to touch the “soul” of the mass. Theweleit notes that soul “is a term often mentioned in connection with the situation of oratory,” and cautions that it “should not be seen as synonymous with the report, the narrative, or the discussion...*Soul* seems to have something to do with the *act* of speaking; the activity is more important than the message the speech conveys” (118). Indeed, the speeches rarely contained much in the way of substantial content at all: “Although the rhetorical stance of the fascist orator is one of substantiated argument, he makes no explicit effort to substantiate anything—he simply makes assertions” (Theweleit 128). The effectiveness of fascist rhetoric is premised on affect, not ideas. Theweleit writes that

the success of the ritual is secured precisely by an absence of substance.  
‘Unification,’ ‘contact,’ ‘conception,’ or ‘illumination’ can occur only if attention

is deflected from spoken content: the assembled crowd does not assemble in order to think or be enlightened (nor is this what the fascist reader desires when he opens a book...indeed, does any reader?). (129)

If, as Theweleit suggests, in most cases people are not primarily seeking enlightenment or edification in rhetorical encounters, then what motivates them to engage with speakers, performers, writers, and other kinds of rhetoricians?

It could be the lure of the physiological high of communal identification, encapsulated in rhetoric, and distributed by charismatic leaders. Attention to the bio-logic of the body opens up nuanced ways of understanding and evaluating political rhetoric that traditional forms of rhetorical inquiry, such as textual and social analysis, fail to consider. For example, in *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science*, an extended polemic against the "reductive psychophysiology of emotion" in the "sciences of mind and brain," Daniel Gross raises the specter of German fascism, and asks, rhetorically, "When a damaged brain isn't the case, what produces poor judgments of character such as the judgment made by the vast majority of Germans in 1933 that Adolf Hitler was a trustworthy leader and Jews untrustworthy?" (35). Gross contends that the "constitutive power of emotions depends upon uneven distribution" of "social passions" (5). Gross argues that emotions such as anger are "irreducibly social," insofar as they only come about when subjects perceive conditions of "asymmetrical power" (3). To Gross, the answer to the question of fascism's hold on Germans minds is self-evident: Nazi leaders used scapegoat narratives to persuade the German citizenry that Jews were to blame for their problems, and these narratives subsequently channeled the people's affective energies into concentrated action. Language is the terrain of ideological struggle; changes in vernacular currencies will bring about changes in

attitudes and actions. The brain, in this model, exerts no influence on thought, and is not *altered* by thoughts; it merely *stores* thoughts. The internal physiological and affective dynamics that produce emotion are, for Gross, outside the purview of rhetorical criticism. Because Gross repudiates biological inputs out of hand, he cannot conceive of the possibility that mindlessly enthralling rhetoric and rituals had *literally* “damaged” German brains by way of neuroplastic alterations in neuronal circuits that impeded critical thought and ethical judgment.

Doidge writes that human beings can add on new neurocognitive structures “if their daily lives can be totally controlled, and they can be conditioned by rewards and...punishment and subjected to massed practice, where they are forced to repeat or mentally rehearse various ideological statements” (306). While Doidge had fascist regimes in mind, variations of the rituals that such regimes employ are also practiced in contemporary America, under the guise of patriotism (the compulsion to stand up and bow the head when confronted with the American flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the National Anthem; the scorn and violence directed towards those question patriotic practices), and consumerism (the ubiquity of advertisements on television, public spaces, the airwaves, clothing, the internet; the social prestige attributed to conspicuous consumption of brand-name goods, and the social scorn visited upon those who cannot consume conspicuously). The neurochemical-fueled rituals in which we routinely and repeatedly participate physically change our brains, and the social cost of not participating in these rituals is greater than most of us are willing to pay.

## Burke on Addiction and Belief

Most contemporary rhetoricians prefer to analyze political rhetoric and rituals through the critical lens of social constructionism, and they often enlist the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke to do so. However, Burke was not a pure constructionist. In fact, it would not be a stretch to say that he laid the theoretical groundwork for a critical neuro-rhetoric. Burke pursued the link between bodily rituals and political beliefs throughout his career, periodically amending his views in concert with new developments in science and politics.

In *Counter-Statement*, his first book of theory, Burke was primarily interested in aesthetic intoxication—the artist’s manipulation of “blood, brains, heart, and bowels” by inducing affective responses in an audience (1968: 36). The key development in *Counter-Statement* is Burke’s concern with the persuasive power of repetition. His specific focus is on forms of language and expression, such as the trope, that are unified by their structure rather than their content, and that share structural affinities with biological processes (Pruchnic 2006: 284). Burke observes, “the rhythm of a page, in setting up a corresponding rhythm in the body, creates marked degrees of expectancy, or acquiescence” (1968: 140). This can be a pleasurable experience, as when we “lose ourselves” in the syncopated beats of a pop song, but herein also lies an element of danger because, as Burke notes, the listener, “in becoming receptive to so much...becomes receptive to still more” (1968: 141). We are liable to “fall into a state of general surrender” which makes us “more likely to accept without resistance the rest of the poet’s material” (1968: 141). This is a state familiar to all of us who find ourselves thinking, whether we want to or not, of a corporate logo upon hearing but a few bars of a

catchy commercial jingle. Burke concludes, “in all rhythmic experiences one’s ‘muscular imagination’ is touched” (141).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Bureau of Social Hygiene hired Burke to research drugs and drug culture, and to ghost write a propagandistic book called *Dangerous Drugs*. Debra Hawhee maintains that Burke’s drug research equipped him to notice that, when viewed in terms “of bodily rhythms and susceptibility, drug users and readers of poetry bear striking similarities. Burke’s description of the rhythmic reader—‘in becoming receptive to so much, he becomes receptive to still more’—might as easily be applied to a tremoring coke addict” (2004: 18). Burke’s work on drugs showed him that “habits and beliefs created through sustained repetition are tenacious, relentless, and, most of all, impervious to reason” (Hawhee 2004: 18). Burke’s most concentrated treatment of the connection between drugs, rhetoric, and ritual can be found in *Permanence and Change*, where he develops his concept of “piety.” Burke describes piety as “the sense of what properly goes with what” (1984a: 74), and these pious linkages extend “through all the texture of our lives” (1984a: 75). While piety is traditionally used in religious contexts to describe habits of thought and behavior that are indications of a subject’s unwavering adherence to a spiritual belief system, Burke extends piety to encompass everyday habituated practices; he claims that even gang members observe standards of piety, such as the “correct way of commenting upon passing women, the etiquette of spitting” (1984a: 77). Piety begins as a set of culturally constructed behaviors and expectations identified with a particular social identity, but through ritualized, habitual practices, it becomes deeply embodied, and unconscious, to the point of seeming “natural”—Burke calls piety “the yearning to conform with the

‘sources of one’s being’”(1984a: 69). The source of being, for Burke, is neither reducible to nature nor nurture; rather, that which nurtures us, culturally, also constitutes us, corporeally. And, by the same token, the ways we move our bodies about influence the ways we think about the world and ourselves.

Rather than understanding the bodily actions as *reflectors* of belief, we see that bodily actions are *generators* of belief. In many ways, this recalls 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Blaise Pascal’s assertion that true belief in God can come only through somatic ritual. Pascal argued that when people who did not originally believe in God “behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on,” they were led to believe “quite naturally” (1966: 152). Over time, pious acting correlates to pious thinking, so that one’s choices in the face of conflict seem to be self-evident, and critical thinking becomes antithetical to one’s sense of what properly goes with what. It is not that one makes “bad choices,” but rather, that the matter of choice itself irrelevant: the pious subject knows in advance of the question what the “correct” answer is. Whether or not our personal moral or ethical standards square with those of the pious subject, we should not, according to Burke, interpret the subject’s decisions as a matter of bad conscience, for they are “guided by a scrupulous sense of the appropriate which, once we dismiss our personal locus of judgment, would seem to bear the marks of great conscientiousness” (77). Brain-bodies become “hooked” on, or addicted to, certain emotional and physical styles of being, and acting otherwise would engender cognitive dissonance in the agent.

In a formulation that pre-dates and predicts Damasio’s theory of somatic markers, Burke points out that “[E]ach temporal event is new, and cannot recur. We find our way

through this everchanging universe by certain blunt schemes of generalization, conceptualization, or verbalization—but words have limited validity” (1984a: 92). Words are “limited” because our primary schema of orientation is affective, and the affective is rooted in the brain and body rather than the mind. Burke argues that the “discussion of the relationship between meaning and affect should also consider at great length the mind-body parallelisms suggested by such sciences as endocrinology” (1984a: n.150). He cites “some research which [he] did in drug addiction” that leads him to suggest an “interaction between intellectual interpretations and the secretions of the ‘body’s drug factories’ (the endocrines and their neural channels)” (1984: n.150). Burke uses neuroendocrinology “to suggest that internal processes can form interpretations: chemical can shape or regulate meaning” (Hawhee 2009: 85). Specifically, it prompts him to realize that “meanings and stimuli merge—and you may assume that, if a certain stimulus has rightly or wrongly a danger-character, a danger-response will result” (Burke 1984a: 150). Burke suggests that this insight changes the critic’s proper approach: “We do not persuade a man to avoid danger. We can only persuade him that a given situation is dangerous and that he is using the wrong means of avoiding it. Danger-stimulus and fear-response are one—and to remove the latter you must redefine the first” (1984a: 150).

Here Burke hints at a possible rhetorical intervention in automatic affective responses to stimuli that have been imbued with fearful associations. “Conversion downwards”—a reduction in scale of the powerful object of one’s excitement—works as an antidote to piety because it pulls the curtain on the wizard behind the operations which have inspired such awe and reverence, and in so doing prompts one to reevaluate his or her orientations. This is an intervention not only into people’s ideas; it is simultaneously

an effort to redirect “bodily impulses and flows of energy—a chemical sort of rhetoric” (Hawhee 2009: 87). The insights Burke acquired through his research into drugs and neuroendocrinology influenced his critical practice—he understood that rhetorical criticism works best when it reveals the machinations that produce belief, because when one is aware of the tricks of the trade, the illusion is dramatically undercut, and space is opened up wherein people can practice a healthy skepticism towards power. Merely debunking the rationale behind specific rhetorical propositions has limited viability because people don’t make rational judgments; they are as much compelled by affect as they are by logic.

By emphasizing the power of endless repetition, Burke intuits the neurological processes that inhibit the critical faculties of the prefrontal brain regions, and make certain kinds of knowledge ontological rather than epistemological because they remold one’s sense of reality at the pre-linguistic level of neural organization. He writes that repetitive thoughts and actions—the pious, “repeated doing of the ‘right’ thing...molds our actions to the farthest reaches of the communicative,” for this is a “complex schema of what-goes-with-what, carried through all the subtleties of manner and attitudes” (1984a: 269). Hawhee draw our attention to how “repetitions of actions is conjoined with a ‘knowledge’ of what is ‘right.’ Bodily repetition and knowledge of propriety are so reciprocal as to become almost identical” (2004: 23). This is how habits are formed, whether those habits are pharmacological or political in nature. Indeed, to the brain, there is little if any difference between these two vectors of experience—the brain does not recognize the distinction between materiality and symbolicity that circulates through the minds of many cultural and rhetorical theorists.

Within a Burkean framework, “rhetoric is the bridge” between the material and symbolic realms, and “the best rhetoric will blend the physical and the linguistic” (Engnell 1). Furthermore, the critic or artist acts as a “medicine man,” administering symbolic remedies to address biological and social problems. Carly Woods observes, “If literature can work with bodily rhythms, it also may have the power to correct those ills that throw off biological harmony. Just as medicine cures the diseases that plague the body, literature may have a curative function, bodily and socially. For Burke, the symbol is medicine for the social ill.” Burke maintained that the social critic’s chief responsibility was not to argue for what is “right,” but rather, to stay aggressively vigilant against efficiency in matters of thought and action, and in so doing “attend to the hypertrophy of style or piety in order to ‘counter’ the onset of ecological imbalance, or worse, divisiveness” (Hawhee 2004: 24).

Burke prompts us to recognize that rhetoric acts like an addictive drug, because it makes people seemingly unable to cogitate their way out of their predicaments. This is true of both everyday citizens and professional critics. As Burke noted during his early research on drug addicts, “we are all drug fiends in a sense, deriving our impetus from drugs naturally produced in the body” (qtd. in Jack 2004: 461). At best, the responsible rhetorician can draw attention to the mechanisms by which the political subject becomes addicted to ideology, and offer rhetorical resources for overcoming that addiction. In the final section, I will outline some rhetorical techne that recognize and respond to the exigencies of our emotion-saturated political media.

### **Rhetorical Recovery**

In contemporary American political media, “deliberative spaces do not really

originate with a kairotic exigence that sparks multiple voices responding to each other”; rather, it comprises “numerous articulations between images, discourses, and feelings” (Rice 209). Attempts to critically engage this state of affairs using the traditional tools of rhetorical criticism, which focus primarily on the cognitive processes by which people formulate, evaluate, and decide to act on linguistic propositions, seem increasingly insufficient in an age in which affect, rather than ideas, are the preferred currency of political culture. As Jenny Edbauer Rice notes, “If affect is something produced through interactions between bodies, then public deliberation probably also produces something that does not coincide with the telos of civic judgment” (210). A theoretical structure with which to analyze and critique the affective and neurological components of mass-mediated political deliberation has yet to emerge from rhetorical studies.

Most critical rhetoricians are content to offer macropolitical analyses of political phenomena, delivered in the form of ideological critiques of cultural texts. The underlying assumption of much critical work that deals with political discourse is that if citizens understand the (often profit related) motives that drive political rhetoric, the fog of affect that clouds their thought will lift, they will make reasoned choices about political figures and institutions, and will vote out of office those who do not have their best interests in mind. Articulated to this attitude is the notion that people will naturally work towards a more just, egalitarian order once they see that malign institutions have emotionally manipulated them. Condit characterizes this as the hope “that if we could only grab the steering wheel and broadcast ‘our’ (more egalitarian, just, caring) rhetorics, people would act the way ‘we’ think they should” (pathosworkshop.com).

However, we cannot remove emotion from politics, or from our interpretation of

politics. Ideological criticism may be intellectually satisfying, but it is not always effective as a driver of political change because people are not motivated by intellectual ideas alone. There is a difference between knowing what one *ought* to do, logically, and recognizing what one is *able* to do, emotionally and behaviorally. This conundrum will be familiar to those of us who have mentally rehearsed terrible visions of the cancer ward while lighting up another cigarette, or lectured undergraduates about class disparity while striving to send our children to a private school in the “nice” part of town. We are neurologically addicted to our affective relations with the people, objects, and substances that comprise the fabric of our reality. Ideological criticism is often ineffective in practical terms because it is premised on denying people that which they affectively desire on the basis of an abstract conceptual framework of ideals. When the rational mind is set against the affective body, the latter usually wins by “persuading” the former to give it what it wants.

Burke declares that there “is no ‘no’ in the psychology of attention. The full strategy for saying ‘*don’t* do that’ is ‘*do* do this’” (1984b: 22). While he was writing about pedagogical theory, he was also intuiting something about how the brain works. When a substance to which the brain is addicted is withdrawn, it overrides the rational mind, and induces the mind to “reason” its way to conclusions that will enable it to maintain the status quo. We saw evidence of this in Westen’s study of political junkies: “when data clashed with desire, the political brain would somehow ‘reason’ its way to desired conclusions,” and it would reward itself for those faulty judgments with a celebratory spritz of dopamine, an action that works to reinforce the thought in memory (xi).

We cannot trust our own minds to think clearly about the matters we care about most. Because these matters produce high levels of affective arousal in us, and because we think about them so much, our attitudes towards them are particularly intransigent. Our internal rhetor of consciousness, hopped up on neurochemicals, is prone to sermonizing in blind faith about the people and ideas we cherish. The result is often uncritical adherence to ideological structures, and unwavering allegiance to charismatic figures.

Philosophers have long sought to formulate techniques to fight this tendency. Nietzsche called such techniques “self-artistry”; Foucault referred to them as “tactics of the self”; and Deleuze termed it “micropolitics.” However, as Connolly notes, contemporary theorists of ideology, “with their inordinate confidence in argument and deliberation, pretty much jettison this dimension of ethical life” (2004: 107). He argues

In a world in which institutional discipline has become extensive and intensive, such tactics can function as countermeasures to build more independence and thoughtful responsiveness into ethico-political sensibilities. You might, thus, act tactically and experimentally upon yourself to fold more presumptive receptivity and forbearance into your responses to pluralizing movements in the domains of gender, sensual affiliation, ethnic identification, religion/irreligion, or market rationality that challenge your visceral presumption to embody the universal standard against which that diversity is to be measured. (2004: 107)

Micropolitical tactics of self-regulation involve intervening in the processes by which affect comes to dominate thought by willfully shifting the flows of neurochemical activity away from the lower order brain regions responsible for emotion, and towards the prefrontal regions that handle consciousness and cognition. Humans are uniquely equipped to exercise these powers of self-control. Critical thinking may be defined as the distinctly human capacity to willfully use symbolic resources to interrupt, evaluate, and possibly intervene in affective compulsions. Burke explains that although all organisms

are critics in the sense that they interpret the signs about them, the experimental, the speculative technique made available by speech would seem to single out the human species as the only one possessing an equipment for going beyond the criticism of experience to a criticism of criticism. We not only interpret the character of events (manifesting in our responses all the gradations of fear, apprehension, misgiving, expectation, assurance for which there are rough behavioristic counterparts in animals)—we may also interpret our interpretations. (1984a: 6)

Put another way, humans differ from other organisms because language gives us the ability to experience a distinction between the body's primal compulsion to act in response to external stimuli, and the mind's capacity to decide whether or not that action is appropriate given the context of the event. Language is that which potentially stands between primitive herd behavior, on one hand, and ethical, critical consciousness, on the other. Rhetoric is the act of channeling language in ways that either promote or prohibit critical thought. We might then say a critical rhetoric, in the Burkean sense, prompts us to interpret our interpretations, and not only our intellectual interpretations of texts and objects, but also our internal affective impulses—our body's interpretation of events. The deliberate application of techniques of self-mastery to one's own entrenched affective impulses makes it theoretically possible to break up pious linkages, and interrogate the ideological structures that undergird these articulations.

Burke encourages us to become active interlocutors with the chemical rhetoric that compels us towards hypertrophied "ruts of experience." As a corrective to piety born of addiction to rhetoric, Burke proposes comic self-examination which should enable people to be *observers of themselves, while acting* in order to achieve "*maximum consciousness*" (1984b: 171). The hope is that a person "would transcend himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the non-rational" (1984b: 171). Burke uses the terms "irrational" and "non-rational" without

moral judgment; he is not encouraging us to eliminate these affective forces, or subordinating them to the rational. He recognizes they are simply a natural part of human being, just as a tree's "decision" to put out leaves in the spring and drop them in the autumn is cause for neither praise nor condemnation (1984b: 171). Burke argues that we should not be "induced to seek elaborate techniques for their excision—instead we merely, as rational men, 'watch' them, to guard ourselves against cases where they work badly" (1984b: 171). The point of the comic corrective is to remain vigilant against the sedimentation of (irrational, non-rational, and rational) attitudes into ruts of experience that misguide us towards arrogance and certainty.

The comic corrective, then, works as a methodology to engage with the self at the level of affect. From a neurological perspective, the *process* of comic self-examination is more important than its ideational *content*. Piety is manifested in neuronal circuitry. With every firing of a circuit, the neurons involved become more tightly "locked in a physiological embrace," a process that is "analogous to the way that traveling the same dirt road over and over leaves ruts that make it easier to stay in the track in subsequent trips" (Schwartz and Begley 108). The way to avoid getting stuck in a rut on the road is to seize control of the wheel and force the vehicle to take a divergent path. Brain activity works in a very similar way—calling up a comic counter-statement when confronted with an emotional rush (the body's chemical rhetoric) breaks up efficient patterns of thought and prevents the brain from indulging its in-built desire for the status quo.

Neuropsychologists and psychiatrists routinely recommend techniques similar to those proposed by Burke for the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's syndrome, and depression. For instance, neuroscientist John Teasdale calls his approach

“mindfulness-based cognitive therapy.” His research suggests, “emotional processing should focus primarily on changing emotional responses to internal affective events and thoughts, so that these responses are short-lived and self-limiting, rather than the first stages of an escalating process” (qtd. in Schwartz and Begley 247). Teasdale’s success in using self-administered rhetorical techniques to help patients work through neuropsychological disorders “offers dramatic examples of how the ways someone thinks about thoughts can effect plastic changes in the brain” (Schwartz and Begley 250). Psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz has similarly experienced success treating OCD patients by teaching them to recognize and “revalue” the brain messages telling them to engage in obsessive behaviors. He concludes that “a change in the valuation a person ascribes to a bunch of those electrochemical signals can not only alter them in the moment but lead to such enduring changes in cerebral metabolic activity that the brain’s circuits are essentially remodeled” (Schwartz and Begley 292). Whether we speak in terms of mindfulness or revaluation or comic correction, a critical analysis of one’s own affective impulses is a form of self-directed neuroplasticity that acts on the physical brain by selectively activating one neuronal circuit over another.

All of these techniques introduce inefficiency into neuronal processes organized around somatic markers. We’ll recall that somatic markers operate below the threshold of reflection, and assist “deliberation by highlighting some options (either dangerous or favorable), and eliminating them rapidly from subsequent consideration” (Damasio 2000: 175). Somatic markers “make decisions easier and faster for human beings whose chamber of consciousness is slow in pace and limited in capacity” (Connolly 2004: 35). However, there are some contexts in which quick and easy is not preferable to slow and

deliberate. Democratic deliberation for instance, works best when participants are allowed the time and the mental capacity to consider multiple perspectives and to evaluate the potential long-term consequences different courses of action might produce.

Burke aligned efficiency with the anti-democratic impulses of capitalism:

“Efficiency,” to borrow a trope from the stock exchange, is excellent for those who approach social problems with the mentality of the “in and out” trader. It is far less valuable for those interested in a “long-pull investment.” Otherwise stated: It violates “ecological balance,” stressing some one ingredient rather than maintaining all ingredients by the subtler requirements of “symbiosis.” (1984b: 250)

Contemporary American culture is organized around the ideology of efficiency, and with that comes the lionization of certainty as the operative mode of engagement with contingency. The political media are especially enthralled with charismatic figures who demonstrate unerring faith in their own ideological and moral orientations, and petition audiences to form passionate collectivities around particular constellations of values. Exposure to this can be, literally, intoxicating, and over time, addictive. In a state of addiction, intoxication can only be maintained if the dosage of the substance is steadily intensified so as to stay ahead of the encroaching tolerance; dopamine addiction demands novelty, and that which one found exciting and provocative last week will seem mundane and stultifying next month. So we change the channel, in search of something new to render us “mindless” with anger, fear, or euphoria.

How do we break out of this cycle? The neurorhetorical treatments currently being administered by therapists offer intriguing insights, but these practices are to this point mainly confined to hospitals and mental health facilities, and they require direct interactions between highly paid scientific experts and individual patients. Therefore, they are useful only as a starting point for critical rhetoricians interested in the problems

of national or international politics. By the same token, the Burkean comic corrective, while a theoretically useful and ethically sound concept, often fails to deliver practical results, perhaps because brains have been constituted by the constant reiteration of antagonistic narratives in our culture so as to be resistant to alternative frames that call for humility, self-effacement, and charity towards one's antagonists.

Additionally, psychotherapeutic "talking cures," whether they are applied by the self or by a trained specialist, are relatively ineffective in treating addiction. The reason for this, according to research psychiatrist George Vaillant, is that "the hold that drug addiction has on human beings does not rest in our cortex," it lies "in what has been called our reptile brain," the brain regions that control primordial affective response mechanisms (432). Addiction of any kind reduces plasticity in the prefrontal cortex, "making it harder for neurons to communicate with each other," and as a result, the cortex "cannot effectively warn of the dangers of bad habits" (Koener). Without the critical sentry of the cortex in working order, the reptilian regions are free to behave as they please. Thus, the "loss of plasticity of neuronal response...renders abstinence beyond the reach of willpower" and "beyond the reach of psychoanalytic insight" (Vaillant 432). This is why, arguably, neither ideological criticism nor orthodox psychoanalytic theories of motivation are up to the task of changing political behavior, especially political behavior that is, as I have suggested, attributable to neurological addiction: merely bringing hidden structures to the light of consciousness is not sufficient. In order to change the minds, we must change brains, and to change brains, we must speak not only to and about the intellect, but also to and about the affective body.

How might critics, as social physicians, theorize healing rhetorics to counter the mass addiction to mindlessness that endangers democracy? We might begin by looking at cases in which neuroretoric has been operationalized to promote individual and social healing on a wide scale. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), for example, names a set of neuroretorical practices that has proven wildly effective, for reasons medical and social scientific researchers only vaguely understand. Curiously, for an organization that exerts such widespread cultural influence—some 1.2 million Americans currently belong to one of AA’s 55,000 meeting groups (Koener)—little attention has been paid to it within rhetorical studies.<sup>23</sup> Neuroscientists, on the other hand, have begun to recognize that “some of the most important brain systems impaired in addiction are those in the prefrontal cortex that regulate social cognition, self-monitoring, moral behavior and other processes that the AA-type approach seems to target” (Schnabel 25). Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Bethesda, Maryland, claims, “A lot of the treatment programs out there are targeting these systems without necessarily knowing that they are doing it” (qtd. in Schnabel 25).

AA, I believe, demonstrates how therapeutic techniques of the self can bridge the gap between private and communal concerns; AA circumnavigates the problem of narcissism that attends to much therapy culture, without demanding that participants forego care of the self entirely. Bringing the individual within the fold of cultural criticism is not a particularly fashionable gesture within rhetorical studies. For instance, Dana Cloud dismisses the “rhetoric of therapy,” and argues that the twofold function of the rhetoric of therapy is to exhort conformity with the prevailing social order, and to

---

<sup>23</sup> Exceptions include Ford (1989) and Jensen (2000), though both of these projects examine the narrative structures of AA literature and practices, rather than their affective components.

encourage identification with therapeutic values: individualism, familialism, self-help, and self-absorption (Cloud 2-3). Cloud maintains that troubled people would best be served by turning their attention away from their immediate problems, and towards hegemonic structures of racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, and capitalism.

One wonders how receptive individuals who are struggling with depression, addiction, or abusive relationships will be to Cloud's prescription. This sort of argument is more compelling in intellectual theory than in embodied practice, and speaks to the effacement of phenomenological experience that characterizes, and enervates, much critical rhetorical theory. Recalling Burke's belief that critical practice should work towards balance and symbiosis, we might look to models of democratic community that encourage equilibrium between care of the self and care of the collective, instead of demanding that people just say no to their individual feelings and desires.

The founder of AA, Bill Wilson, drew heavily from William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when he was writing *Alcoholics Anonymous*, AA's organizing text, the core of which is the famous "12 Steps." Journalist Brendan Koerner reports that Wilson "was deeply affected by an observation that James made regarding alcoholism: that the only cure for the addiction is 'religiomania.' The steps were thus designed to induce intense commitment, because Wilson wanted his system to be every bit as habit-forming as booze." By drawing on James, one of the first modern theorists of affect, Wilson managed to "tap into mechanisms that counter the complex psychological and neurological processes through which addiction wreaks havoc" (Koerner).

AA is fundamentally premised on the idea that you “cannot easily give up a habit without having something else to do...bad habits need substitutes” (Vaillant 432). Alcoholics are not only addicted to alcohol; the drinking is but the center of a congregation of social and sensory affective attachments—comradeship with fellow drinkers, the security of the barroom, the smells and sounds and tastes of the drinking life—that are severed when the alcoholic makes the decision to quit. The dopamine-addicted brain still hungers for these pleasurable stimuli, and when the rational mind, headquartered in the prefrontal cortex, tries to leave the lifestyle, something akin to a civil war breaks out in the neuronal circuits. In this fight, the rational mind, weakened by years of abuse, is at a severe disadvantage. While the brain is mending, “AA functions as a temporary replacement—a prefrontal cortex made up of a cast of fellow drunks in a church basement, rather than neurons and synapses” (Koener). In other words, the AA group serves as an external surrogate for a critical consciousness that cannot function properly because physiological damage has been done to the brain region that typically engages in reflexive thought.

The well-known confessional aspect of AA meetings, by which participants stand before the group and tell their stories of addiction and struggle, lacks the exhibitionistic, moralistic and disciplinary qualities that epitomize much of the confessional public address we find in mass media, from the “confession room” cutaways in reality TV shows, to the disgraced politician’s self-flagellation before the camera. The intended purpose of the confessional in AA is neither to entertain, nor to achieve redemption through shame, but rather to willingly appeal for external supervision from the group. External supervision “appears necessary because in prospective studies conscious

motivation to stop drinking at admission” to treatment centers “is not associated with outcome” (Vaillant 432). External supervision, in this case, is unrelated to discipline—there are no punitive consequences should a participant relapse. Instead, it is part of the process by which one admits and accepts that he or she is powerless over the addictive substance. When we translate powerlessness into neuro-rhetorical terms, we understand that this means that the addict cannot trust the rhetoric produced by his or her own conscious mind. The narrator of consciousness has an agenda, and will craft a narrative that will persuade the subject to seek the substance that the brain-body desires.

Engagements of the kind that occur at AA confessional addresses prompt participants to recognize the instability of their sense of self-contained, autonomous subjectivity. People are permeated by the group—boundaries between mind and body, self and other, are rendered ambiguous, but a space is still maintained for the individual to care for him or her self. When members stand before the group and share their stories, they gain new levels of self-awareness—that is, they become aware that their securely-held identities are fictions composed of language that they did not will into being, but rather, were created by an authorial function of the brain and body that originates below the threshold of conscious regulation. And consciously engaging in this geological exploration of the layers of self helps to “reinvigorate the prefrontal cortex” by restoring plasticity (Koerner). Complex cognition, such as that which is required when one engages in self-analytical thought, counters the dangerously efficient neuronal activity that accompanies the unreflective self-certainty that characterizes the thinking of an addict, because it redirects neurochemical flows away from the well-worn neuronal circuits associated with addiction, and in so doing begins to carve out new circuits. Neurons that

haven't communicated in years are invited to "speak" to each other again, and the more that they do so, the closer that relationship becomes. Strong new bonds between neurons correspond to new avenues of creative and critical thought for the subject.

AA stresses the futility of attempting to engage this process on your own. Members of the AA community are asked to seek guidance from other participants, and to address a higher power. This is Step Eleven, which reads: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." The organization often comes under attack because of its requirement that participants pray to a higher power; Vaillant notes, "the rhetoric and emotional language of the spirituality of AA" often "leads journalists and social scientists to understandably fear that AA is a religion or a cult" (434).

We must be careful to draw out the differences between cultic forms of spirituality and the deployment of spiritual rhetoric of "Step Eleven." From the vantage of a critical neurorhetoric, the imperative to address a higher power acts as a substitute for the addictive substance because it is mediated by limbic circuitry, the chains of synaptic connections that modulate fear and desire. Communication with others, even imaginary higher powers, evokes a strong affective response, and thus delivers a neurochemical high that imbues it with emotional impact, while at the same time exercising those parts of the brain which enable critical thought. Michael McCullough, a research psychologist who specializes in religion, states that "certain forms of prayer and meditation are pinpointing precisely those [prefrontal] areas of the brain that people rely on to control attention, to control negative emotion and resolve mental conflict" (qtd. in

Schnabel 26). Spirituality takes on a pernicious ideological quality when the answers to one's prayers are predetermined by moral guidelines encoded in unassailable texts. In such cases, the one who prays is comparing his or her thoughts and actions against a prescribed set of prohibitions, for the purpose of determining one's success towards the goal of achieving an ideal of perfection. A democratic spiritual community such as AA, by contrast, rigorously refuses to come to any conclusion as to what constitutes the communal ideal by prohibiting exclusionary discourse. Members of AA are encouraged to pray for the power to remain uncertain as to who, exactly, is in charge (of their minds, of their group, and of the world), because certainty breeds mindlessness, and mindlessness is the root of addiction. This is a prayer for pluralism in the political sense (to refrain from judgment against other members of the community), the philosophical sense (to acknowledge multiple levels of Being within oneself), and the neurobiological sense (to recognize competing vectors of influence originating from different regions of the brain). The goal, then, is not a tragic Christian effort to achieve transcendence through purification, but rather, a comic Burkean one: to have the presence of mind to never forget that we are all "huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss" (1984a: 272).

I do not intend the preceding paragraphs as a definitive study of the rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous. While that is a site of inquiry I intend to excavate in the future, my present purpose is merely to briefly demonstrate what a neuroretorical analysis of a prominent cultural institution might look like, and to petition the reader to consider how the rituals and practices of Alcoholics Anonymous might be repurposed for critical rhetorical endeavors. For instance, I want us to reflect upon how we might use the

principles of addiction recovery to serve a pedagogical function in courses designed to help students intervene in the ideological habits of mind and body to which they (and we) are addicted. We might also consider how neuroretorical critical tactics might work in conjunction with the ideological or semiotic critiques many of us ask our students to perform on cultural texts.

If modern politics is characterized as an addictive practice, it is incumbent upon critics to formulate programs that can help political junkies break their addictions. This does not entail that subjects strive to ascend to a state of purification because, as I've indicated, we are always already addicted to affective investments in ideational structures. The liability that inheres in most addiction treatment programs is that they are themselves addictive structures. We might therefore evaluate the ethical qualities of treatments programs according to the degree to which they foreground and self-reflexively interrogate their motives and aspirations with regards to politics. For example, if in our roles as teachers we wished to responsibly employ some of the methods found in Alcoholics Anonymous in college courses devoted to critical thinking, we would need to be constantly on guard against the impulse to engage in a pedagogy of mimesis, whereby students would be called upon to practice what *we* preach.

Instead, instructors might "confess" their ideological addictions, discuss how this feels, how it prompts us towards to particular readings of cultural phenomenon, and tell the story of how their life experiences have prompted them to adopt and maintain a particular political worldview. Students would be required to perform a similar confessional act, in an environment free from judgment or retribution. We cannot presume that students would want to change, but inducing change through force of one's

own ideological certainty should not be a motivating desire if we are truly committed to cultivating the attitudinal orientations best suited for democratic citizenship.

Alternatively, we might attempt to instill in our students and in ourselves a healthy distrust of ingrained habits that are manifested in patterns of thought and affective response. In other words, we might playfully cultivate a productive critical paranoia that leaves us constantly on edge, skeptical of the messages being sent to us by our own brains and bodies, and dogged in our pursuit of the centers of power that installed these communication networks within us. In so doing, we may find that power has no localizable center—it is imposed both from without, through institutional ideological apparatuses, and from within, through circuits of neuronal activity that usually operate behind a veil of consciousness. To become, and remain, conscious of the social and neuronal operations that produce consciousness is the first step on the path towards intervening in those operations, and to follow that path requires the recognition that there is no final destination: there is not a point in which we are free of addiction, but we can choose the terms of our captivity through unceasing struggle against internal and external rhetorics that proclaim that the way things are now is the way they will always be.

## CHAPTER 5

### VITAL SIGNS: CONSUBSTANTIALITY AND CORPOREAL RHETORIC

The modern idea of the sovereign, self-transparent subject was central to rhetorical studies for most of the discipline's history. The discipline was founded as the study of public speaking and persuasion, and its practitioners presumed that a speaking subject could stand outside of culture and make decisions as to how to strategically use language to persuade his audience. In addition, rhetoricians took for granted the existence of listening subjects in the audience who could bracket their emotions and rationally judge the merits of the arguments being made by the speaker, and intentionally act on those arguments they judged to be most worthy. In the postmodern era, this conception of the subject was displaced by thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, for whom "the subject emerges as an effect, as something constructed rather than constructing" (McKerrow 1993: 56). One cannot willfully think oneself into autonomous subjectivity because the stuff of thought is the language of the culture. Thus, one is always already a subject because one is always already subjected to the power dynamics that inhere in language. According to postmodern and post-structural theorists, you do not speak language; language speaks through you. As such, your sense of subjectivity and free will is illusory, a dream composed of words that are not your own.

Much has been written about the "death of the subject" brought about by the postmodern linguistic turn in the humanities. Haunting the funeral for the subject was an anxiety in rhetorical studies and cultural studies about the possibility of agency. An agent is traditionally understood as "one who through conscious intention or free will causes

changes in the world” (Cooper 421). Carol Miller notes that “the decentering of the subject . . . signals a crisis for agency, or perhaps more accurately, for rhetoric, since traditional rhetoric requires the possibility for influence that agency entails” (143). How are people to make judgments and commit to change if their thoughts are already scripted by structures of language and power that precede them? Critical rhetoric, as a subfield of rhetorical studies, was largely constituted as an emergency response to postmodernism and post-structuralism’s decentering of subjectivity and the attendant anxiety about agency. Thomas Rickerts notes that the fragmentation of the subject was a key concern in rhetorical studies throughout the 1990s because it “was held to jeopardize political and rhetorical agency” (10). Rhetorical agency was considered to be “important because it would give voice to the voiceless, empowering subaltern groups, and thus, presumably, weakening structures of institutional, corporate, and ideological domination” (Miller 144). However, without agential subjects to whom activist-critics could address their liberatory rhetoric, the entire purpose of rhetorical studies seemed to be in question. Critical rhetoricians entered the breach in an attempt to theoretically rescue agency by extracting it from deconstructionist oblivion.

One way critical rhetoricians attempted to intervene was to draw a distinction between subjectivity and agency. While the former suggests a way of *being* in the world, the latter indicates a way of *acting* in that world. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell defines agency as “the capacity to act... to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community” (7). She writes that agency is “ambiguous, open to reversal” (7). That is, oppressive social forces that quash one’s capacity to think or act of one’s own volition can take one’s agency away. This definition

solidifies agency as a substantial quality—it gives critics something to save. To become an active agent doesn't require one to refuse the language and culture to which one is subject—this would be a futile effort, for the very terms by which one contemplated one's refusal would themselves be a symptom of the language provided by the culture. Rather, the subject who desires agency must choose what kind of subject he or she wishes to be, by selecting and pursuing a particular moral and ethical trajectory from within the range of options afforded within the discursive community.

According to most first-wave critical rhetoricians, because people's subjectivities are constituted in discourse, the possibility exists that they could be re-constituted by discourse if they are made aware of the power relations that determine the discursive frames that delimit their thought. Agency comes about when people are "empowered" to become self-reflexive towards the language they use to represent the world to themselves and others. In his germinal essay, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," Raymie McKerrow argues that this requires the subject to willfully practice "permanent criticism—a self-reflexive critique that turns back on itself even as it promotes a realignment in the forces that construct social relations" (1989: 91). The task of critical rhetoricians, then, is to equip people with the critical tools they'll need to recognize, reflect upon, and potentially reject the power relations that are naturalized through the normative discursive practices and symbolic rituals of everyday life.

In the 1990s, critical rhetoricians made the case that agency is not something you simply *have* by virtue of being human; rather, it is something you *do*, a conscious rhetorical performance of self chosen from among the various models of selfhood made available by the culture. However, there was a gap in this model of agency; as McKerrow

points out, the critical rhetoric project “leaves one wondering about the ‘who’ that is engaging in the performance as rhetor or critic” (1993: 52). *Some* willful entity has to recognize and heed the call to critical reflexivity and agency; if not a self-aware subject, than what?

McKerrow considers the possibility, raised by some critics, that the body can act independent of the mind, and that this opens up space for a liberatory political practice. In particular, he cites performance theorist Randy Martin, who wishes to push beyond the cognitive model of agential performance by highlighting situations in which the body “overflows” socially constructed inhibitions and “acts alone, without mind” (McKerrow 1993: 53). Martin offers dance as a political performance as a scenario in which “a message of despair or exhilaration comes less from the sense of a commanding consciousness, than from the activity of the body acting on its own” (qtd. in McKerrow 1993: 54). Martin declares that “[W]ithin our society, the mind is the thing that watches, but also that which is watched” and that “the state, the source of social control, is a state of mind” (2). When we get “out of our minds,” as we do in the throes of ecstatic rituals and performances, we are also slipping out of ideological constraints.

McKerrow is skeptical of Martin’s claim that the “mindless” body can will its own act. He asks, if this is the case, “can the possibility of a subject acting on its own be far away?” (1993: 54). McKerrow ultimately rejects the notion that the body can have a will of its own, for if he grants the body agency, then he must also grant that perhaps critically empowered subjects cannot always actively, or consciously, make choices from within the social field. An agential body acting separately from a subjugated mind would suggest that there are other factors at work in political emancipation than words and

ideas. The critical rhetoric that McKerrow has in mind is tied together with critical thinking, which he believes necessarily precedes the possibility of agential action. Critical rhetoricians are hesitant to admit the body and brain into theories of agency and emancipation because corporeality introduces areas of difference between people that cannot be easily explained away as socially constructed illusions: does aging, mental illness, neurological trauma, pharmacological intake, genetic predisposition, or habitual participation in physical ritual influence the degree to which subjects are able to arrive at critical agency? If any of these questions were answered affirmatively, it would have significant consequences for critical rhetoric's political mission, as the critical rhetoric project is founded on the humanist premise that all subjects of ideology have the potential to become agents of ideological change, after the subjects are granted the capacity for critical thinking by critical rhetoricians, educators, or activists.

### **Agential Possession**

Ambivalence about the pre-linguistic body's role as a determinative factor in matters pertaining to agency is a hallmark of contemporary rhetorical and critical theory, and those critics who express interest in granting the body greater significance are often met with skepticism. For instance, in a 2006 *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* special issue on "the body," Susan Jarrett responds to Debra Hawhee's claim that "we have been too absorbed in the life of the mind," and that we should "attend to the extra-discursive, the nonrational or the extra-rational," by arguing that enthusiasm for the agential body "in the absence of an accompanying discourse—a metadiscourse that is the hallmark of teaching, saying how one does the thing one does—runs the risk of reaffirming what was once called a vitalist theory of writing... The challenge for those shifting the emphasis to

bodily arts is to keep language in play” (218). Jarrett worries that if we abandon the “citizen-subject” by focusing on the ways in which bodily rituals and performances influence our attitudes and motivations, we will lose the political imperative for critical, rational deliberation.

Another contemporary rhetorical critic, Jordynn Jack, directly addresses what she perceives to be the danger of incorporating the brain in critical rhetorical theory. Jack cautions rhetoricians to refuse to accept the “metaphor of the brain as text” because the “correlate of this metaphor tends to be the suggestion that scientists can therefore ‘read minds’ ... as though scientists could literally read a transcript of someone’s thoughts rather than *interpret* visual images or data” (2008: 24). The problem with recognizing a brain that produces texts, Jack claims, is that we might be tempted to “anthropomorphize the brain, making it an active agent” (2008: 25). If the brain is an active agent, then it follows that the thinking subject could just be an effect of that brain’s agential actions. It appears that Jack’s anxiety stems from her humanist political investments in a subject who is either self-aware, or can be made self-aware, and can therefore either decide or be persuaded to commit to social change.

Most contemporary rhetoricians accept some form of the argument that subjectivity is not autonomous or transcendent, and agree to a greater or lesser extent that socio-historical forces construct subjects. The *raison d’être* of critical rhetoricians is to imbue these subjects with the animating spark of critical consciousness. One of the dominant metaphors in scholarly writing about agency is “possession”: subjects of ideology may lack agency, but they can learn from teachers of rhetoric how to think and act critically, at which time they will come to possess agency. Christian Lundberg and

Joshua Gunn claim that “understanding agency as a possession is central to reproducing the humanist model of the intentional agent who owns the capacity to make agential choices” (89). This conception of subjectivity and agency is, in essence, a reiteration of “mind over matter,” a Romantic belief in the human capacity to will change, one which is ultimately a leap of faith. Indeed, Lundberg and Gunn call the humanist belief in agency *ontotheology*, “a humanist gospel that has elevated agency to the status of the godly, lording over the material and spiritual universe” (84).

Lundberg and Gunn go on to make the provocative claim that we do not need a theory of agency—all that matters is that people *feel* like they are in control, and can translate that feeling into what appears to be self-willed actions. It does not matter where agency comes from, as long as things get done. Lundberg and Gunn use the Ouija board as an illustration. When the planchette is moved across the board by a force that seems to transcend the individual participants, it is clear some one or some thing is acting, though each participant in the séance disavows being the acting agent. Is the planchette being moved by a collective unconscious will? Has a ghost quietly joined the party? Are the participants each consciously exerting force but denying culpability? The answer is ultimately unknowable. Therefore, Lundberg and Gunn “favor an uncertain posture towards the flow of agency and agents implied by an open disposition toward the séance, a posture that embraces a restless and roving insecurity” (86). Whether the origin of agency is attributable to “language, ideology, perhaps even a spirit” is of no particular consequence to these rhetoricians. It is the rhetorical results that matter, not the origin of something called the “rhetorical agent” (Lundberg and Gunn 88). It is clear that people

can act; we do not require a knowing, intending subject to theorize the effects of people's actions.

So why should we belabor the matter of agency any further? Critical rhetorical theory is invested not only in theoretical speculation, but also in political practice; critical rhetoricians seek to intervene into rhetorical practices they judge to be detrimental to a democratic, egalitarian society. Different theoretical foundations generate different tactical possibilities. It is my conviction that humanist theories of agency current in critical rhetoric are insufficient to the task of intervening in rhetorical techniques and technologies that are specifically designed to sidestep critical consciousness and directly effect material alterations of the brain.

Critical rhetoric, as both a pedagogical practice and a field of scholarship, often focuses myopically on "raising awareness" as a strategic means to equip subjects of ideology with agency. The underlying assumption is that when subjects learn how they are being manipulated by power and language, they will be "empowered" to engage in creative, subversive, or resistant acts of personal and social transformation. Foucault calls this "taking care of oneself," and argues that it is to engage in "true social practice" (1986: 51). As McKerrow explains, the "subject, as actor, is not the center of all experience and change; rather, it is constituted as one facet of the possibilities of change within social relationships. Engaging in actions that properly 'take care of oneself' is to have influence in one's reordering of social practices" (1993: 60). Social symbolic forces construct the subject, but the critical choices the subject makes from within the range of symbolic options available to him determines the constitution of an idiosyncratic self, or the agent. The critical agent produces variations on the discursive patterns to which he is

subject, and in so doing, introduces difference and opens the possibility for change, thereby influencing the shape the social field will take in the future Taking care of the self, then, is the first step towards taking care of society.

The problem with critical interventions that hope to grant agency to people by teaching them to cultivate or take “care of the self” is that it is not self-evident that there is one “self” to which one can attend. While most contemporary accounts of subjectivity and agency are quick to note that subjects are the effect of flows of power and discourse, they nevertheless maintain that redirections of power/discourse can create situations in which an agential self may emerge, and be maintained through assiduous self-care. However, there are many circumstances in which the conscious regulation of one’s own cognitive and emotional activity still fails to result in a cohesive agential unification of the brain and body. If we examine cases in which the thinking self is at odds with his or her somatic self, we might come to the conclusion that making people cognitively aware of social problems is not always enough—we can be intellectually aware of what needs to change, yet nevertheless find ourselves incapable of acting on that knowledge, because knowledge is not processed, stored, or accessed in just one site within the body.

Critical rhetoric often focuses on the epistemic quality of belief. Epistemic beliefs “can be altered relatively easily by recourse to new evidence and argument” (Connolly 2010: 196). But epistemic beliefs, through reiteration, eventually enter another register of experience, and become “intense, vague existential dispositions in which creed and affect mix together below the reach of reflective considerations alone” (Connolly 2010: 196). It is here that ideology takes on an ontological or spiritual character—where it possesses the subject, as it were, rather than merely informing him. The critic cannot

persuade the spiritualized subject to abandon his belief using logical appeals because beliefs of this nature are not ideas; they are the ontological foundations on which ideas rest.

This is the existential condition Althusser was highlighting when he argued that ideology's functioning is "inextricable from the intangible yet nondismissable, and therefore material, *psychosomatic mediation* involved in subject formation" (Chow 2010: 224, emphasis in original). Rey Chow points out that in formulating his theory of embodied subjectivity, Althusser drew not only from Lacan's post-structuralist psychoanalysis, but also from Blaise Pascal's recommendation for religious skeptics: "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe" (2010: 225). Althusser writes that where the individual subject is concerned, the "existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject*" (168-69, emphasis in original). Materialism, as it is invoked in contemporary rhetorical and cultural theory, tends to refer to economic or superstructural conditions that contribute to, or determine, the content of consciousness. If we pay attention to the work of neuroscientists and affect theorists, we see that economic or social materiality necessarily intersects with bio-materiality, for the ideologically-informed rituals that we automatically practice as a part of everyday social life change the structures of the brain, and impact our capacity to arrive at the critical consciousness that rhetoricians identify as the central characteristic of agency.

When we "care for the self," we are, from a neurological perspective, attending to but one point in the distributed nervous system: the brain, and more specifically, the

circuitry by which the prefrontal cortex communicates with lower order brain regions such as the amygdala and hypothalamus. Focusing only on cortical functions ignores the communication relays between the brain and body, and thus stops short of helping us to understand the full range of the proceedings involved in creating the sense of rhetorical agency that we experience when we feel as if we are “thinking for ourselves.”

Neuroscientist David Eagleman likens these internal communications to a “neural Parliament with different political parties that are battling it out to steer the ship of state.” In this metaphor, each party represents a different site in the brain-body circuit, and each of these sites has a perspective on events that is sometimes at odds with the perspectives of other sites. Elizabeth Wilson explains that at various points throughout the body

there are local eddies that collect, transform, dampen down, distribute, duplicate, and magnify the innervations they receive. These neurological assemblages form a series of “mini-brains”—sites of psychological intensity—that arrest and divert axial traffic. The notion of psychological action at a distance (“disorders in higher brain centers”) misjudges the radically distributed and communicative nature of the body’s nervous systems. (2004: 41)

In order to change those beliefs that have moved from the epistemic to the ontological plane, a rhetor must commune with more than people’s cognitive selves—he or she must also speak to other agents of the body that collectively make up the internal audience of rhetoric.

In the next section, I’ll turn to a case study that illustrates Baruch Spinoza’s claim that “the human body is composed of very many individual bodies of different nature, and so it can be affected by one and the same body in many different ways” (115). We do not possess a singular agency, because many distinct agents physically possess us, each with its own desires and dispositions. We should not give singular priority or grant undue power to the most conceptually sophisticated among them—those associated with

conscious judgment and linguistic expression—because in the physiological body, as in the body politic, the most thoughtful and articulate agents do not always wield the most power.

### **The Internal Audience**

In a famous study conducted in the early 1990s, the pioneering neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran found that he could change the physical composition—and therefore the behavior—of a living human brain just by telling it a story. What made this more remarkable is that the conscious subject in whose skull that brain rested did not believe Ramachandran’s story was true, and still does not to this day. Nevertheless, this narrative encounter changed the way the subject perceived and acted in the world. Ramachandran used a carefully crafted rhetoric to circumvent the subject’s rational, intellectual faculties, and induced action in the subject’s body without a corresponding ideational change in the mind. He accomplished this by speaking a language the brain could understand.

Within contemporary rhetorical theory, it is widely accepted that in order to change people’s minds, you must cultivate identifications with them. In a famous formulation, Burke claims that “[Y]ou persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (1969b: 55). The concept of identification was path breaking in rhetorical studies because it shifted the field’s focus from “rational deliberation, the supplication of good reasons and so on, to the study of persuasion as identification...expanding the process into the domain beyond conscious awareness” (Gunn 2008: 140). Identification

encompasses both the intellectual affiliations we choose to make, and the affective, desirous attachments we pursue without conscious choice.

Burke explains that people are distinct from each other because they are composed of different physiological material, yet they are bound together in thought and action because they have “common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*” (1969b: 21). Consubstantiality encompasses the many ways in which our interests, attitudes, values, experiences, perceptions, and material properties are shared with others, or could appear to be shared (Burke1969b). According to Burke, people accept or reject their interdependence based on the degree with which they identify with each other’s symbol systems. A savvy rhetor can create a sense of consubstantiality by disseminating narratives or symbols with which divergent subjects can all identify, and thereby establish a totality that did not previously exist.

Consubstantiality is a concept most often used by rhetoricians to explain how rhetors bring together groups of people with divergent interests and induce them to act as “one body.” For example, we might consider the ways in which the post 9/11 Bush administration employed rhetoric that sought to erase symbolic and affective lines of division between Democrats and Republicans, and redraw them to demarcate new divisions between “Americans” and “Muslims.” Underlying this critical use of consubstantiality is a theory of subjectivity and agency that holds that people either believe one thing or the other—they can’t hold two competing ideas at once. This overlooks the possibility that there are multiple agents within each subject, and that the agent who can recognize and express his or her ideas and motives is not necessarily the one in charge, or the one to whom the rhetor speaks in order to foster identification.

Ramachandran's experiments with victims of phantom limb syndrome, a traumatic disorder that affects amputees, demonstrates that for consubstantiality to inaugurate a relationship *between* people, it must also take effect *within* them. People with phantom limbs can see and comprehend that their arm or leg is gone, but they continue to feel the presence of a "ghost limb" in its place. Phantom limb sufferers visually and cognitively apprehend that they have lost an appendage, but nevertheless, they still feel a "ghost limb" in its place, one that itches, cramps, and aches, often to an excruciating degree.<sup>24</sup> This condition occurs because the brain doggedly adheres to a time-tested narrative (We have an arm) and rejects the revised version offered up by the eyes (Our arm is gone). The amputee's conscious mind is caught in the crossfire of this debate, and consequently, it "avows two contradictory realities simultaneously: the reality of the limb and the reality of its destruction" (Grosz 72).

For centuries, Western poets, philosophers, physicians, and psychologists had been baffled and fascinated by phantom limbs. In each epoch, the phenomenon is explained according to the dominant metaphysical orientation of the time. In the early modern period, phantom limbs seemed to prove that the (immaterial) mind and (material) body were distinct entities—Descartes referenced phantom limbs as proof that the soul was separate from the body that transported it. In the Victorian era it was widely believed that the logic of materialism could solve what "less advanced" societies took to be purely spiritual problems. Victorian doctors initially tried to cure the syndrome by shaving off layers of skin and bone on the remaining stump. When this did not work, they diagnosed victims with neurotic hysteria, a disorder of the (usually female) mind, or accused them

---

<sup>24</sup> Grosz notes that the phantom phenomena occurs in almost 100% of amputees, and is not restricted to amputated arms and legs, but is also triggered by lost penises, breasts, eyes, and facial parts (71).

of “fraudulent representation,” which is to say, of rhetoric (O’Connor 751). For much of history, it was difficult to ascertain the prevalence of phantom limb syndrome among amputees, because patients would be “reluctant to admit pain in a part of the body that is no longer present for fear of being thought mentally disturbed” (Flor 182). Thus discredited as psychic disorder, the syndrome was largely ignored by scientists until the horrific violence of the American Civil War sparked renewed interest because thousands of otherwise “sane” soldiers wounded in battle reported ghost limbs where their arms and legs had formerly been. The scientific reevaluation of phantom limb syndrome can be attributed to the clinical and literary writings of Silas Weir Mitchell, a “doctor of nerves” in Philadelphia. Weir Mitchell was close friend of, and sometimes benefactor, to Walt Whitman. Weir Mitchell believed that amputees’ experiences had profound philosophical implications, because “their sensory ghosts were living proof of Whitman’s poetry: our matter was entangled with our spirit. When you cut the flesh, you also cut the soul” (Lehrer 14).

Of course, in contemporary Western society, the language of the “soul” retains little currency in medical and scientific circles. Most 20<sup>th</sup> century practitioners of psychology or medical science chose between opposing sides of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy, with psychologists asserting that “supernatural” phenomena such as phantom limbs were problems of the psyche, and medical doctors and scientists insisting that the psyche is purely a product of the brain. Psychological explanations were grounded in psychoanalytic or personality theories of chronic pain that proposed that phantom limb pain results from pre-amputation psychological disturbance (Hill)—a variation of the hysterical diagnoses of the Victorian age. Just as surgical interventions did not “cure”

phantom limb because the problem was not of a strictly bio-material nature, talk therapy proved ineffective in treating phantom pain because the patients were not denying the loss of the limb or repressing memories of the traumatic event. We now know that the syndrome is neither a psychic disturbance, nor a physical trauma. Rather, it is a neurorhetorical problem, created by a breakdown of communication between different agential entities distributed throughout the brain and body.

We never directly apprehend our bodies; rather, what we experience as “body” is the end result of a split second communication that takes place between sensory cells on the body, and patches of nerve cells in the brain that represent specific body zones. The brain maintains a virtual map of the entire body in neural circuitry located in the sensory homunculus, a small patch of cells located near the top of the cerebral cortex. The contours of this map are constantly being reinforced by relays and feedback loops from different sites of activity dispersed all over the body. These sites send messages to the brain about the body’s state, and the brain registers the data on its virtual map. When you hit your arm on an object, or look at it dangling by your side, or hear your hand brush against the side of your desk, your sensory cells send reports about the event to your brain, and the brain uses these reports to retrace the virtual body map in connections between neural cells. Based on the principle of neuroplasticity, every time the body map is activated, this image of the body becomes more stable, and more phenomenologically “real” to the subject.

The brain determines if a report is valid based on what it has learned from past experiences, and then decides if it should commit the body to motion or translate the impulse into mental thought. After making a judgment call, it sends its verdict back to the

appropriate body part with instructions on what to do. When you accidentally put your hand on a hot stovetop, it is not your skin that recoils. The sensory cells on your hand send a message to the brain about a possible disturbance, and then the brain sends a message back to the hand telling it to move. The conscious mind arrives relatively late in the game, registering what happened only after the brain has taken the necessary steps to prevent damage to the body.

Because this transaction happens incredibly fast, in our lived experience the correspondence between sensation, perception, and consciousness seems to be almost immediate. However, seeing (or feeling or hearing or smelling) is not “believing” unless the brain is convinced that what the eyes or other sensory organs report squares with what it has learned to expect. If there is a discrepancy between expectation and experience, the brain can overrule the sensory cells’ arguments and “explain” bewildering information by recourse to time-tested interpretive frameworks. When an arm is suddenly removed from the body, its corresponding representation on the body map in the homunculus remains. When that portion of the body map is stimulated by spillover activity in neighboring regions of the brain, the brain conjures up the ghost limb. The brain continues to insist upon the arm’s presence, even as the eyes clearly perceive its absence. For people who suffer from phantom limb syndrome, the brain makes a faulty judgment about sensory stimuli because it has wired itself to expect the presence of a limb. In addition, it sometimes makes a creative executive decision to reorganize itself without consulting the other agents involved. People who have lost an appendage will feel stimulation of the lost part when someone touches an unrelated part of the intact body, because the brain redraws its body map in an effort to make sense of surprising new circumstances.

Phantom limb syndrome is “a neurological effort to give shape to an otherwise disorderly set of somatic signs” by imposing “narrative form”(O’Connor 111); it is a way for “neurology to narrate itself” (O’Connor 112). Turning to the lexicon of rhetorical theory, we might call phantom limb syndrome a failure to achieve consubstantiality: though the brain and the body are of the same material substance, they no longer identify with each other is because the brain is operating according to a plot that the body no longer recognizes. Phantom limbs neither respond to symbolic treatments such as talk therapy, nor to materialist treatments such as surgical excision, because such intervention only address one of the many agents in the brain-body network. Ramachandran succeeded where others failed because he realized that if you want to persuade a ghost, you best speak that ghost’s language.

As a Western neuroscientist well versed in non-Western mystic practices, Ramachandran’s innovation was to refuse to choose between physical and symbol-based therapies. Ramachandran grew up India and cites as inspiration the yogis he watched walk barefoot across coals and drive needles through their chins while immersed in trance (Doidge 195). He locates his neuroscientific explorations in a mystic and poetic lineage that “retains a place for the imagination and illusion in...the production of pain and its relief” (Connolly 2002: 10). Ramachandran built a simple mirror-lined box, into which his patient inserted both his intact limb, and the stump of his severed limb. When the patient looked into the mirror, he was given the visual impression that his arm had been restored. Ramachandran could massage the illusory arm, coaxing the painfully cramped phantom hand to relax its grip and cease tormenting its owner. Physical therapy, in this case, was a matter of repeatedly telling the brain a story, week after week, until it

believed it to be true, and adjusted its neural firing patterns accordingly. Of course, the patient mentally “knew” this was a visual trick, and yet this knowledge was no impediment. The patient’s brain, in effect, overruled the argument being made by the patient’s skeptical mind (“I do not have an arm”) because it found Ramachandran’s argument (“You have an arm: it’s right there in the mirror”) more persuasive.

By paying careful attention to “the language of nerve impulses,” Ramachandran was able to see that “every act of perception...involves an act of judgment by the brain” (1999: 66, 77). Pain, and indeed all phenomenological experience, is “an opinion on the organism’s state” rather than “a mere reflexive response” (Ramachandran qtd in Doidge 192), and the brain “gathers evidence from many sources” before making a decision (Doidge 192). These decisions eventually become physically substantiated in the brain’s cells, and with each reiteration, become increasingly resistant to change. Ramachandran’s experiments with phantom limb patients suggest that the human brain both responds to and produces a rhetoric of its own. Indeed, it seems to have a subjectivity of its own that is formed through communicative practices that occur within the body, and that operate independently of the conscious mind of the subject.

Ramachandran’s work breaks from orthodox psychoanalytic methods that are premised in drives that mediate between the psychic and the somatic realms, or in Freud’s terms, between the “soul” and the “body.” According to this theoretical paradigm, destructive unconscious impulses result when internal over-excitation of neurons create an excess of stimulation that the brain cannot regulate on its own, and thus channels this excess into a different place, that of the psyche. The nervous system, in essence, is attacked by its own excitation, and creates a space with which to catch the

overflow—the “[P]sychic energy thus takes up where nervous energy leaves off, functioning, in a sense, as *the force of force*, which makes possible *what is impossible for the nervous system*: to find a means of appeasing or satisfying this constant, urgent, threatening internal excitation” (Malabou 2012: 31, emphasis in original). Freud argues that the brain is not equipped to distance itself from excess by representing that excess—it cannot study its own workings. Instead, it must defer excess to another system altogether: the psychical apparatus.

The object of the drive that we receive in conscious or unconscious thought is a representation, a metaphor for the unmanageable nervous energy. We never apprehend the drive itself, but rather, we experience its emissaries in the form of affective impulses and mental images, which dance upon the psychic stage of dreams and fantasies. Thus, psychic energy “is, in a certain sense, the rhetorical detour of nervous energy. Not able to discharge itself within the nervous system, endogenous excitation is diverted into roundabout paths, into turns comparable to tropes or figures of discourse” (Malabou 2012: 35). Michael de Certeau similarly claims that “the operations which order representation by articulation throughout the psychic system are in effect rhetorical: metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches, paranomasia, etc.” (22-23). The argument that the psychic system is rhetorical is premised upon the assumption that the brain is not. Malabou summarizes this position:

Because no symbolic activity exists in the nervous system, psychic energy figures this very absence in a style that is inherently foreign to the brain, which is without initiative and does nothing but transmit energy or, as far as possible, maintain it at a constant level. *The unconscious is structured like a language only to the extent that the brain does not speak.* (2012: 35, emphasis in original)

However, recent neuroscience disputes this supposition. As we saw with Ramachandran's work with phantom limbs, there is constant communication between the sensory cells of the body and the nerve cells in the brain, and within this relay there are always judgments being made by non-psychic corporeal agents about the state of the total organism. Wilson observes that his data "gives us a glimpse of the body in conversation with itself" (2004: 98). Indeed, the brain and body network regulates itself by "informing itself about itself" (Malabou 2012: 37). When faced with dysfunction, such as the loss of a limb, the brain does not pass along the problem to the psychic plane; rather, it attempts to come to a solution within its own operations by reorganizing itself materially. What psychoanalysts call the psyche, and what humanist rhetoricians call the agent, might be better understood as one component in an integrated and mutually constitutive psychosomatic system.

Ramachandran was able to perform a successful intervention because he understood that "raising awareness," as a psychoanalyst or a critical rhetorician might, is not an appropriate tactic when belief has migrated from the plane of epistemology to that of ontology, or, if we employ the vernacular of neuroscience, when it has transferred from the prefrontal cortex (site of conscious, self-reflexive thought) to the sensory homunculus (site of phenomenological perception) and its relations with the somatic totality. When beliefs are wound within the dense network of circuits that bind the soma and psyche, it is short-sighted and ineffective to speak to the cognitive apparatus as if it were solely in command and capable of willfully reordering perceptions of the world, if only it knew how—which is to say, if it could reclaim agential power via rhetorical instruction. Wilson notes that the "vectors of governance" in the body are "fully disseminated—which is not to say that they are undecidable (an unsystematic array of

random associations), but rather that they are not delimitable within conventional parameters of cause and effect, origin and derivation” (2004: 23). The task of the critical rhetorician, then, is not to stake a claim for the foundational character of agency, but rather, to practice kairotic wisdom when it comes to deciding what form of agency is in play in any given rhetorical encounter. James Kinneavy describes kairos as “the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved” (84). Ramachandran exhibited a keen attention to kairos with his phantom limb patients. The rhetorical tactics he employed for that particular situation may not be applicable to all situations, but if we hope to engage in productive criticism, we should seek to expand the critical resources at our disposal, not limit them in the name of disciplinary tradition.

Silvan Tomkins suggests that cognition has been too narrowly understood as a “high command mechanism” that would assess and arbitrate other ways of knowing (Gibbs 200). He makes a case that we should not separate cognition from physiology at all, and instead argues for “a more democratic system with no special mechanism completely in charge or, if in charge, able to endure as a special mechanism” (Tomkins 17). Just as political democracy is enervated by the concentration of power and influence in one body or group positioned atop a hierarchy of importance, so too is critical rhetoric that speaks only to “the head.”

According to Burke, rhetoric promotes action by inducing different material bodies to identify with shared forms, and in so doing creates a new symbolic body, the consubstantial relationship. Consubstantiality is similar to what Massumi calls “felt relations” that can be shared “at any distance from the sensuous forms they evoke”

(Massumi qtd. in Gibbs 201). Yet “if language is action at a distance on the forms it connects, it nevertheless acts directly on the body” (Gibbs 201). Anna Gibbs writes:

Language is in fact highly dependent on the body’s physical capacities for its effectivity. It is also very selective, concentrating on evoking experience in one sensory channel at a time: in this respect, it treats the body not as a unified and indivisible whole, but as an ensemble of potentialities that can—and must—be selectively activated. The body, then, is not so much a medium as a series of media... (201).

Rhetoricians routinely critique mass mediated texts for the liberatory or oppressive political messages concealed within their images, but shy away from the media of the body. But this should not be the case, as the corporeal body traffics in a communicative currency very similar to that that is exchanged in the body politic. Both corporeal and social organizations maintain a vision of a virtual, idealized state of affairs against which they compare, judge, and attempt to order the actions of their constituents. For a social formation, this may be a vision of totalitarian order or egalitarian democracy. For a corporeal formation, this is usually an image of an intact set of body parts governed by an executive mind quartered in the brain. Inevitably, the contingencies of life disrupt and contradict the ideal of wholeness and order, and in the ensuing discord we find what Burke calls the “characteristic invitation to rhetoric” (1969b: 25). In his discussion of consubstantiality, Burke describes the sort of dissonant relations that call rhetoric into being:

Insofar as the individual is involved in conflict with other individuals or groups, the study of this same individual would fall under the head of *Rhetoric*. . . . The *Rhetoric* must lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the War of Nerves, the War. (1969b: 23, emphasis in original)

Burke’s inclusion of the “war of nerves” takes on new resonance if we extend his understanding of nerves to include both the nervous energy that unites or divides

collectivities, and the nervous energy that neurons use to speak to each other. Both kinds of energy can be redirected by rhetors who practice the kairotic savvy to what tactic are appropriate in a particular rhetorical situation.

As critical rhetoricians, we do not need to abandon the study of public discourse, politics, and consciousness if we want to think about the brain and body's internal rhetoric, because intervention "in one register will reorganize patterns of organization in the other register, not because one determines the other, but because the two registers are ontologically connate" (Wilson 385). A humanistic critical orientation that purports to stand "outside" of, or "above," neurophysiological processes cannot account for the locus of the thought that the critic expends on the target of his or her criticism. Likewise, a posthumanist criticism that kills off the subject and declares agency to be an illusion of power and discourse has difficulty attending to events, such as phantom limbs, that indicate fissures between epistemology and ontology, wherefrom a pre-discursive bodily agency appears to make claims and demands. What we need, then, is a new critical orientation that is grounded in the rhetorical tradition, yet responsive to new insights into the science of human communication, and to new developments in the techniques of persuasion. In the final section, I will briefly make a case for the value of "the New Vitalism" for critical rhetorical studies.

### **New Vitalism and Critical Rhetoric**

The dominant tendency "within contemporary rhetorical theory has been to identify rhetoric with the symbolic," and to set this dyad in opposition to the corporeal body and the physical world (Engnell 22). This tendency is most likely attributable in

large part to the influence of Burke. While Burke is arguably the theorist most responsible for bringing the body back into the fold of rhetorical studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he is also steadfast in his belief that in the last instance, language is the prime mover of human thought and action, and that there is a fundamental distinction between words and things.

Burke summarizes this as the distinction between “action” and “motion,” which corresponds to a distinction between mind and brain. He writes, “there is the dimension of sheer physicality (sheer ‘motion’) by which a word is uttered, transmitted, heard, read, etc. Or there is the sheer physicality of the motions of the brain when the brain is in any way using words, ‘thinking’” (Burke 1970: 16). These motions are aspects of man’s “animality,” and his symbolicity “adds a dimension of action not reducible to the non-symbolic” (Burke 1970: 16); in other words, language grants actionable life to the essentially inert corporeal matter that makes up the engines of thought, such as the organs of the central nervous system. The nervous system generates, via motion, the symbolic flows of thought and expression that the human agent can direct towards willed action in the world. By contrast, lower animals, because they lack language, are driven by motion alone, merely reacting to stimuli they encounter in their environments. Burke explains: “where symbolic operations can influence bodily processes, the realm of the natural (in the sense of the less-than-verbal) is seen to be pervaded, or inspirited, by the realm of the verbal, or symbolic. And in this sense the realm of the symbolic corresponds...to the realm of the ‘supernatural’” (1970: 17).

Burke is reticent to grant nature or the body agency, and in this respect he demonstrates one of the defining characteristics of modern rhetorical study: a discipline

wide pushback against the notion of self-motivating or self-organizing vitalistic systems of the sort routinely described by mysticism and science. Vitalist orientations are widely considered politically dangerous and threatening to the field of rhetoric because they refrain from situating the human at the center of all events. Vitalism lost intellectual currency in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because humanist philosophers and theorists resisted the idea that a life force could exist which granted meaning to human events; the (somewhat anthropocentric) presumption was that humans bestowed meaning to matter by recognizing and categorizing it.

The earliest manifestations of vitalism appeared in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time when many poets and philosophers became interested in myth, mysticism, and spiritualism, which they believed could counter emerging mechanistic and scientific ways of understanding the nature of existence. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the study of vitalism merged scientific and humanistic questions regarding the nature of affective transmission or contagion:

How was it that certain fashions, fads and trends seemed to spread throughout populations with a rapidity that seemed to defy the action of logic or rationality? How did certain fears and forms of hysteria, mania and emotion spread such that they appeared to bypass rationality and reason? What caused individuals in groups to behave in ways that might perplex, bemuse or undermine their sense of themselves as subjects in other contexts? What enabled certain individuals to command the obedience, compliance, love and adoration of others, such that they would be exalted and revered as charismatic leaders? (Blackman 27)

All of these social phenomena seemed to indicate porousness in the boundaries that separated the self and other, the human and non-human, the symbolic and the material, and they all suggested that communication was the invisible link that bound these spheres together in ambiguous ways. Intellectuals of the time studied occurrences such as hypnotic trances, séances, psychic mediation, and psychotic hallucinations for clues as to

how communicatory practices harnessed some vital force that induced altered states of being. While in our era, the study of mysticism has for the most part fallen from academic fashion, some theorists in the humanities and social sciences continue to investigate the non-linguistic, non-rational, affective components of communication with an eye towards developing theories that address the “issues of change and transformation through a recognition that materiality is governed by relations of indeterminacy, contingency, and openness” (Blackman 29).<sup>25</sup> This work in social and cultural theory is being described as a new materialist vitalism. The new vitalism takes as a cornerstone principle

the notion that the driving force or forces behind any life process—be it evolutionary, psychological, chemical, biological, or otherwise—cannot be reduced or understood wholly by rational law. However, to drive a life process of any degree of complexity and longevity, a locomotive of *some* kind must be prefigured; and vitalism takes energy *inherent* to the process as its power source, rather than something outside of it. (Venus)

This emphasis on the interior dynamics that compel transformation stands in contrast to that of liberal humanist criticism, which “normally contrasts the ideality of the human to the materiality and mechanism of the non-human” (Lash 324). Vitalism stresses the self-organization of humans and non-human matter, whereas most contemporary cultural and rhetorical theory emphasizes the various ways that external symbolic systems organize human thought and action. This leads critics down a well-worn path of inquiry that ends in explanations of causality that point to determinative macrostructures of power manifested in discursive practices that shape cognition and behavior. The dominant theory of embodied subjectivity in the humanities suggests that subjects are inscribed by culture, but stops short of explaining how corporeal matter enables or resists inscription.

---

<sup>25</sup> See Fraser et al. (2005), Latour (2004), Brennan (2004), Massumi (2002), Lash (2006).

Instead, this theory holds that once we become cognizant of what's happening to us, we can choose to refuse it. However, as I've illustrated in this chapter, the body is capable of refusing our refusal. This indicates that there is something going on that escapes the grasp of constructivist critical paradigms, and this "something" is what the new vitalism seeks to capture.

Rhetorical theorist Byron Hawk argues that "vitalism has been constructed as the negative opposition to our contemporary rhetorical practices" (3). According to Hawk, many rhetoricians associate vitalism with Romanticism, and fear that embracing vitalism will draw attention away from the ideological structures that construct the illusion that there is an autonomous self that can create and express itself free from cultural constraints. Hawk disputes this association. Taking into consideration recent advancements in what we know about the complexity of the relations that hold between mind and body, and between mind-body and society, Hawk makes a case for what he calls "complex vitalism": "Rooted in biology and materiality, such an approach is far removed from mysticism and romanticism but is genealogically linked through the same grounding question and key assumptions" (6). To understand this genealogical linkage, we should recall here that sophistic rhetoric is born from the mystic tradition of Gorgias's "sacred incantations sung with words" that "beguile," "persuade," and "alter" the soul "by witchcraft." The question Gorgias sought to answer in his *Encomium of Helen*—which agency within the subject compels action in response to rhetoric?—is largely the same question pursued by many contemporary neuroscientists, affect theorists, and Vitalists, and the answer Gorgias arrives at—it is not the rational, willful mind, but a vital force that joins the symbolic and somatic—links the mystic rhetorical tradition to

contemporary neuroscience. Both Gorgian sophistry and recent cognitive neuroscience are premised on the inextricability of the word and the world, the symbolic and the corporeal.

Recent neuroscience stresses that agency and subjectivity are not strictly cognitive possessions; they are, rather, the result of complex negotiations that take place between various agential entities dispersed throughout individual bodies, and between those entities and other bodies. Agency and subjectivity are relational—they depend upon inter- and intra-subjective processes that unfold over time, and that obey a logic that is often outside of our awareness and control. Because a sense of a stable (individual or social) body depends on consubstantial relations between different agential sites within and between bodies, we can say that humans are better characterized as “affective communities” rather than unified subjects. Affective communities is a term coined by an important figure in new vitalist thought, Felix Guattari, who maintains that the individual is always a group subject (Genosko 2000). For Guattari, “an affective community requires that it is not only the unified ‘we’ that needs to be fragmented from within” (Bertelson and Murphie 152). It is also the “I,” which is always already a “multiplicity within oneself” (Guattari 216). Guattari argues that understanding the individual and the group as eddies within vital flows of energy and affect should inform our understanding of the politics of difference: “It is a matter not only of tolerating another group, another ethnicity, another sex, but also for a desire for dissensus, otherness, difference. Accepting otherness is a question not so much of right as of desire. This acceptance is possible precisely on the condition of assuming the multiplicity within oneself” (216). If we accept that multiplicities exist within bodies, we may be compelled to refashion our

critical practices to more fully address not only how subjects should act within society, but also how subjects might foster better relations among the various constituencies that make up the self, with an understanding that the introduction of new linguistic frames might not be sufficient to the task of realigning affective impulses and intellectual orientations to meet particular ideological goals. It may be insufficient precisely because the intellect is not the master of the body, and nor is the body the ruler of the mind. Rather, these loci are points on a vitalistic circuit that is animated by linguistic symbols, among other things, including neurochemicals, pheromones, hormones, genetic codes, and many other non-discursive yet influential vital forces.

Among the many subfields operating under the umbrella of contemporary cultural theory, material or corporeal feminism has most enthusiastically embraced a neo-vitalism. Material feminists maintain, “nature is more than a passive social construction but is, rather, an agentic force that interacts with and changes the other elements in the mix, including the human” (Alaimo 7). Theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz, Elizabeth Wilson, and Claire Colebrook advocate a “new vitalism” as a response to a sense of “the exhaustion and limits of the linguistic paradigm” (Colebrook 52). Vitalism, in this contemporary iteration, is not understood as the spirit that infuses matter, but rather as an acknowledgment of forces—be they evolutionary or neurological or physical--that operate in and through corporeal bodies, and joins them with their material, ecological, and social environments. New Vitalists turn their sights to the somatic responses that cannot be referred to the agency of the subject, but that nevertheless exert influence on thought and behavior. These theorists are emboldened by recent developments in brain science that move away from a reductive search for proof for cultural and behavioral

phenomena in the inert matter of the brain, and instead understand such phenomena as “both formed through time and grounded in the body and its processes” (Colebrook 52).

The New Vitalism proposed by some feminist theorists refuses “the idea that matter needs to be granted meaning by thought” (Colebrook 56). They focus on dynamism—the potential that inheres in matter, but a potential that may act on its own accord, and sometimes contrary to the wishes of humans. One of the central topics in this approach is the question of agency, particularly the agency of bodies and natures (Alaimo and Hekman 7). According to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, vitalism prompts us to

consider anew the location and capacities for agency.... Conceiving matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directness, and thus no longer as simple, passive, or inert, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature. (100)

Perhaps we cannot master nature, but we can talk to it, and become consubstantial with it, if we know how to speak its language. Ramachandran’s work provides a vivid example of the practical advantages to be gained by incorporating material vitalism into rhetorical theory. It bridges the chasm that separates “the corporeal from the social (usually read as the discursive or textual)” that has “created an impasse in studies of embodiment” (Blackman 31). If we understand that forms of symbolic activity animate both the social sphere and the body’s interior, we may be less inclined to segregate and extoll the importance of one form over the other.

New vitalist theories “find bodies exhibiting agentic capacities in the way they structure or stylize their perceptual milieu, where they discover, organize, and respond to patterns that are corporeally significant”; they describe “how living matter structures

natural and social worlds before (and while) they are encountered by rational actors” (Coole and Frost 20). The overriding purpose of this dissertation is to promote the idea that critical rhetoricians should seek to function as social physicians. This requires us to attend to, and be fluent in, the language of both the social symbolic, and bio-symbolic vectors of communication, because one melds inexorably into the other. The new vitalism investigates the confluence of agencies that collectively comprise the circuit of communication, and rhetoricians who wish understand how consubstantial bonds are formed or broken should engage with the work being produced within this emerging field of research.

## CHAPTER 6

### **An Uncritical Condition: Rhetorical Violence and “Brain Trauma”**

In public discourse, violence is generally characterized as an act of antagonistic physical force directed from one individual towards another that moves the recipient’s body through space and time. “Violent rhetoric,” on the other hand, usually refers to visual signs or spoken words that trigger emotional distress in targeted audiences because these symbolic expressions indicate a rhetor’s desire, potential, or intention to commit acts of physical violence against them in the future. If rhetorical violence influences the actions of those to whom it is directed, it does so by persuasion, albeit a form of persuasion that is ominously shadowed by the specter of coercion. And if we accept these criteria, then it follows that rhetoric cannot be literally violent itself, since it does not directly or immediately move corporeal matter. Violent rhetoric can only *inspire* violent action, after it has passed through the mediating screen of the “mind.” The question of how violent rhetoric compels action in some people and not others remains unanswered.

This question has taken on increased urgency in recent years due to incidents such as Jared Loughner’s January 2011 massacre of six bystanders at a Tucson, Arizona political event held by U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, and the November 2009 Fort Hood shooting, in which U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, reportedly under the influence of Jihadist rhetoric, was charged with gunning down thirteen people and wounding thirty others. Commentators in the national press struggled to articulate what, if any, connection there was between the inflammatory rhetoric that has become the common vernacular of political discourse, and the physically violent actions committed

by the gunmen. Journalists and pundits often employed environmental metaphors to describe the way violent energy unleashed by vitriolic rhetoric seems to hang in the air, and periodically stirs someone to shed blood. It was observed that “implicit instigations to violence have become a steady undercurrent” in political speech. They claimed, “building levels of vitriol in our political discourse... have surely contributed to the atmosphere in which this event transpired,” and speculated that “political passion” has “created a climate promoting violence” (Hulse and Zernike). Paul Krugman baldly asserted that “violent acts are what happen when you create a climate of hate.” There is clearly something going on, but it’s unclear exactly what it is, or what can be done to remedy the situation. What have contemporary rhetoricians offered to clarify the ambiguous relationship between violent rhetoric and physical violence?

The answer is, surprisingly little. Most critical inquiries into rhetoric and violence focus on the ideological and representational aspects of violent rhetoric.<sup>26</sup> Such work makes arguments about what should or should not be represented in speech or on screens, and formulates interpretive strategies that may enable subjects to critique what they say and hear. Ideological criticism is guided by the assumption that changes in the patterns of representation and reception will counteract the potentially deleterious effects of violent words and images by equipping subjects with a “critical consciousness” through which to filter the rhetoric they encounter. This presumes, of course, that the cognitive apparatus of consciousness is the chief means by which people come to make judgments about what to believe, and how to act in the world. In previous chapters, I have attempted to call these presumptions into question by demonstrating that the internal dynamics that lead to

---

<sup>26</sup> For a review of recent articles on violence and rhetoric, see Rand (2009).

conscious decisions take place on a pre-linguistic, unconscious plane, in the neural networks by which the brain and the body communicate with each other and engage with the external, social world. I explained that rhetoric is a force that physically alters the body's interior, and influences perception prior to thought. In this chapter, I will apply those insights to the problem of violence. Specifically, I want to chip away at the opposition between symbolic and material violence, for if encounters with rhetoric physically shape the neural mechanisms that enable or inhibit a range of possible future actions, than symbols are not merely abstract structures, but also blunt instruments. I will argue that greater attention must be given to the neurophysiological damage wrought by rhetorical violence. This is an invisible violence for two reasons. First, it occurs below and prior to the subject's intellectual apprehension, and second, rhetorical studies lacks an adequate theoretical lens with which to examine it, and bring it into the light of critical inquiry.

From a neuroretorical perspective, critiques of violent rhetoric that conceive violence as a problem of representation sometimes arrive too late in the game, because the event of violence has already occurred; that is, the subject of violence "*has already been affected and effectuated by the affective encounter with the style and content*" of the representation (Abel 144, emphasis in original). That is, subjects may have been neurologically traumatized by rhetorical encounters in such a way that prevents them from thinking critically about future encounters. Criticism that focuses only on representation often overlooks this, and proceeds from the assumption that people can be immunized against the effects of violent words and images if they are given the right interpretive framework through which to intellectualize what they see and hear.

While in rhetorical studies the immediacy of the event is often devalued in favor of the representation of the event, it is my contention that the potential for trauma that inheres in the force of the event has neurological effects that may diminish a subject's capacity to represent and resignify violent experiences. We need a critical rhetorical theory that engages with affective registers of experience "below" the intellectual apprehension and regulation of the self-aware subject, because this is often the level at which rhetorical violence moves us. If we only address violent representation in terms of what they *mean* (linguistically), we miss what they *do* (affectively), and what things mean is always correlated to how they make us feel, and not the other way around.

I submit that people's critical capabilities are their most effective protection against rhetorical violence. However, one cannot be critical if one lacks the neuronal functions required to engage in sophisticated cognitive operations of self-reflection, skepticism, and empathy. As I've described elsewhere in this dissertation, contrary to the humanistic faith in the people's inherent potential for agential freedom that is maintained by many rhetorical critics, neuroscientists and affect theorists show us that agency and critical sophistication are dependent on the cultivation of dense neuronal networks of communication. If these networks are not given the symbolic and material resources they require to flourish, they wilt, and as neural networks go, so go the subject's capacity for critical agency.

Kenneth Burke tells us that "all living things are critics": criticism is a definitive component of the human condition (1984a: 5). It might be more accurate to say that most of us are born with an innate capacity for criticism, but if we don't use it, we lose it. We all have an in-built neural *potential* for critical thought, but because the brain is not a

hard-wired machine, it's not something we naturally or inevitably get to keep. Neural connections that are not regularly activated fall into disrepair and eventually cease working altogether. Doidge explains: "Neuroplastic research has shown us that every sustained activity ever mapped—including physical activities, sensory activities, learning, thinking, and imagining—changes the brain as well as the mind. Cultural ideas and activities are no exception" (288). We might add "critical thinking" to that list. But, because plasticity is "competitive," each time "the plastic brain acquires culture and uses it repeatedly, there is an opportunity cost: the brain loses some neural structure in the process" (Doidge 298). Social experience is always "political," and "violent," insofar as it inaugurates an internal struggle for dominance within neural circuitry. However, this is not a zero sum game. A astute critical mind requires the establishment of neuronal democracy, whereby no one structure is permitted to grow unchecked, at the expense of others contradictory structures.

Non-democratic ideological institutions can ensure their perpetual viability by defining, via discursive and embodied practices, which synaptic networks are allowed to grow in subjects, and which are not, and in so doing these institutions enact physical violence without leaving an external mark. Doidge notes that totalitarian regimes seem to intuit people's neuronal vulnerability, and exercise power through rhetorical exercises that target young, developing brains. He cites a math quiz distributed in North Korea that asks, "Three soldiers from the Korean People's Army killed thirty American soldiers. How many American soldiers were killed by each of them, if they all killed an equal number of enemy soldiers?" (Doidge 305). By establishing an affective network that articulates Americans with antagonistic Otherness and violence retribution, this rhetoric

aims to constitute something deeper than a “difference of opinion” about ideological perspectives; rather, it creates “plasticity-based anatomical differences, which are much harder to bridge or overcome with ordinary persuasion” (Doidge 305). Reiterations of a rhetorical claim reinforce its prominence in thought, and “each thought alters the physical state of [the] brain’s synapses at a microscopic level” (Doidge 212). If the claim is not assiduously buttressed by competing claims, eventually it can be fused into a state of near permanence, while simultaneously dissolving the brain capacity to form a contradictory idea. Therefore, dogmatism and piety are not only ideological problems; they are also neurological conditions, wrought through violence that is both rhetorical and physical at the same time. Michael McGee, in his discussion of Isocrates, has referred to rhetoric as a kind of “social surgery.”<sup>27</sup> The relevance of McGee’s insight deepens if we consider that rhetoric is in many respects akin to neurosurgery performed without breaking the skin.

The same might be said of criticism, that which has the potential to be ideological rigidity’s nemesis. “To be critical” is not only a mental orientation; it is also a material means of organizing the structures of the brain. If we take seriously the notion that to be alive is to be a critic, then diverse, challenging discourses and experiences are the substances—as real and necessary as air or water—which allow us to live.<sup>28</sup> But while the strategic deprivation of life-sustaining physical materials such as air and water commonly falls under the rubric of violence, the withholding of symbolic materials is not afforded the same treatment in the vernacular, perhaps because critics theorize rhetorical

---

<sup>27</sup> “Isocrates: A Parent of Rhetoric and Culture Studies,” unpublished manuscript, 1986. Available online at <http://mcgeefragments.net/OLD/isocrate.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Joshua Gunn (2005) has suggested link between uncritical subjects of ideology and zombies, the “undead.”

violence as an assertive force, delivered via representations. An alternative could be to focus on what is withheld, for violent rhetoric is most influential when subjects lack the neurocognitive apparatus to compartmentalize and resituate symbolic inducements.

In the next section, I will review some of the intellectual currents within the critical rhetorical tradition that frame the debate about violence and rhetoric for many contemporary scholars. The contributions of Pierre Bourdieu on symbolic violence, and Judith Butler on hate speech, are important theoretical guides for critical rhetoricians. Bourdieu and Butler differ on what subjects are capable of doing to resist or subvert symbolic forms of violence, because they disagree on the role the corporeal body plays in the formation of subjectivity. While Butler is hesitant to allow for a physiological body that is wounded by words, there is a gap in her theory of the origins of subjectivity that presents an opportunity to introduce the communicative networks of the central nervous system into the discussion. I will propose that Catherine Malabou's concept of the "neuronal subject" fits into this gap, helps us to overcome the impasse between linguistic and materialist theories of subjectivity, and opens up new ways to recognize the violence of rhetoric.

### **Symbolicity and Violence**

A "cherished topos of the rhetorical tradition" is the notion that persuasion is an "alternative to violence" (Kennerly 274). This idea dates back to the earliest rhetorical theory of the ancient Greeks, who personified persuasion in the Goddess Peitho, and violence in the Goddess Bia. John T. Kirby explains that for ancient rhetoricians, the juxtaposition of peitho and bia was meant to signify an antithetical collocation of ideas:

“I will try to persuade you but, failing that, I will force you” (3). This distinction between persuasion and force retains currency in contemporary rhetorical scholarship. Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin note that contemporary rhetorical scholars “have prided themselves on the eschewal of physical force and coercion and the use in their place of language and metalanguage, with refined functions of the mind, to influence others and produce change” (3).<sup>29</sup> Rhetoricians often proceed from the assumption that “rhetoric manages violence by substituting contestory...words for violent actions” (Hunter 3).

The traditional opposition between rhetoric and violence is correlated to the traditional opposition between symbolicity and physical materiality. Carole Blair notes that in “recent memory, rhetoric has been defined by, and theorized according to, its most ephemeral quality: its symbolicity”; she observes that there is a “near consensus” among rhetoricians about its basic symbolic character (18). Celeste Condit describes this consensus as a reiteration of the “‘common-sense’ dismissal of language by many people on the grounds that it is immaterial—mere words, nothing but air vibrating, the opposite of ‘deeds’ or the real” (1999: 327). Rhetoric, then, is commonly understood as a vehicle for carrying meaning to a receptive mind. The mind is a mediating presence that in turn orders another vehicle—the body—to act. According to most rhetoricians, if rhetoric is capable of violence, it is symbolically, or metaphorically violent, insofar as it does the motivational work of physical coercion without directly moving the flesh. Distinctions between the symbolic and the material have made it difficult for rhetoricians to

---

<sup>29</sup> Foss and Griffin argue, however, that the exercise of influence to change minds is itself a form of violence. To remedy this, they formulate a theory of “invitational rhetoric”: “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (5).

adequately account for how seemingly disembodied discursive practices induce people to physically act in ways that appear to be unreflective and automatic.

Noting the tendency among rhetoricians to “divorce the mind from the body, with the latter seen as inferior,” James Aune recommends that critical rhetoricians “reframe the notion of ‘ideology’ into ‘symbolic violence’” so as to more fully capture the fact that symbolic structures of power permeate lived experience at every register of being, and not only the cognitive and linguistic (2011: 430, 432). Aune submits that if “we complicate the traditional liberal opposition between rhetoric and violence to include ideology as symbolic violence, we will end up with a richer reflection on the relationship between rhetoric and social change” (2011: 430).

Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence” a “gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims” (2001: 1). Symbolic violence “operates in the realm of doxa, the typical condition of correspondence between a social order and agents' internalized dispositions of perception, appreciation, and action structured by and thus adapted to that very social order. The correspondence makes the social world appear natural, even to those who fare badly in it” (Jung108). It is the means by which the oppressed come to tacitly accept the terms of their oppression, at “the level of the most profound corporeal dispositions” (Bourdieu 1993: 55). Ideology, for Bourdieu, is a fully embodied practice, a way of being. It determines not only how we think, but also how we perceive and move through the world. Symbolic violence is manifested in an unconscious relationship between external economic and social structures, and internal structures of thought and perception, or “socially inculcated beliefs” (Bourdieu 1998: 103). Our desires, emotional reactions, and opinions are all produced by our immersion in an ideological system that

we cannot recognize because it permeates even the sensory and cognitive structures we use to bear witness to, and reflect upon, our environment. Ideology might be considered violent because it forcefully delimits that which is perceivable and thinkable, no less than blinders and chains ascribed a particular conception of reality to the captive audience in Plato's cave.

As Moon-Kie Jung notes, the term symbolic violence “derives its rhetorical force, in part, from its jarringly oxymoronic pairing of ‘symbolic’ and ‘violence,’ disturbing commonsensical boundaries of what violence is and bridging the often, if falsely, counterposed spheres...of meaning and materiality” (110). Bourdieu positions physical violence as something that only becomes necessary when powerful institutions fail to exercise sufficient or effective symbolic violence. Physical coercion is unnecessary in a fully-functioning state of hegemony because for subjects, consenting to the will of power is a force of habit, which takes root in the body prior to or simultaneous with the development of a subject's sense of self-identity. Subjectivity and subjugation are rendered synonymous. Symbolic violence induces people to “build up *nonconscious, unwilled* strategies for avoiding the perception of other possibilities” (Hoy 15). According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is more insidious and efficient than physical coercion because it forestalls acts of critical contrarianism and subversion by making those acts seem unnatural and undesirable. The subject of symbolic violence doesn't behave in ways that accord with the dominant ideology because he fears torture or imprisonment; he does so because he genuinely believes, in his mind, brain, and body, that that is the “normal” or “correct” way to behave.

Bourdieu is a social scientist, not a critical rhetorician, and as such he is more invested in developing comprehensive explanatory theories than emancipatory rhetorical practices. His theory of symbolic violence is useful for ideological criticism because it fleshes out our understanding of how ideology is manifested in physiology, and offers an analytical framework with which to interpret social embodiment. However, some critics invested in social change find Bourdieu's ideas restrictive, because in his view, ideology almost wholly determines social existence, and offers little space for subjects to conceive of or perform alternative ways of being. As Romand Coles observes, "there is precious little in [Bourdieu's] writing to suggest that body practices themselves can be structured in ways that tend to generate imaginative critical interrogations, flexibilities, push-back against the limits of the self-evident and radical transformation" (289). Bourdieu maintains that cultural habits, embodied through practice and strengthened through repetition, precede and frame consciousness such that

the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture . . . are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as 'stand up straight' . . . (1977: 94).

If ideology penetrates to such a deep register of corporeal life as to take on the qualities of ontology, where are we to find the critical foothold from which we can begin the process of transformation? Judith Butler is critical of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence because it tends towards an "overdetermined" view of subjectivity in which "subjective dispositions are too tightly tied to the social practices in which they were forged" (Lovell 11). With Bourdieu, we have no grounds on which to justify our hope

that the subject of symbolic violence will have the cognitive wherewithal to recognize, and refute, the ideological structures which imprison him or her, because cognitive and emotional habits compel the subject to cling, obstinately, to the forms of life that make up his or her social reality. Butler, on the other hand, insists on a certain agential freedom to introduce variations into social practices that break up totalizing structures of belief. Butler claims that Bourdieu makes social institutions “static,” and thus “fails to grasp the logic of iterability that governs the possibility of social transformation” (1997: 147).

Resistance, according to Butler, occurs in individual psychology, through the performance of personal narratives that subvert hegemonic norms. Hegemonic normativity is a discursive narrative into which most subjects script themselves through their unconscious adherence to rules of social expectation. These expectations severely limit—but do not foreclose altogether—the range of what is thinkable and doable for a subject within the dominant ideology; therefore, they may be considered a form of symbolic violence. However, for Butler, ideology does not insinuate into the organs and sinews, as Bourdieu would have us believe.

According to Butler, there is neither a “natural” physical body, nor a psychic interiority that pre-exists cultural inscription. She maintains that social reality is not grounded in physical or material conditions, but is continually created as an illusion “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign”(1990b: 270). The body, too, is a symbolic construction, insofar as we only understand bodies through the discursive frames available to us in our culture. Butler explains: “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and

successors as well...The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" (1990b: 272). Her sense that the body is always symbolic, constituted by ideas rather than neurons, underpins her arguments about the nature of the link between rhetoric and violence.<sup>30</sup>

According to Butler, the "I" which recognizes its self is an illusory product of discursive structures, always already divided from itself by the non-presence of language. Therefore, when rhetorical violence is committed against a subject, it must occur on a representational plane; it impacts the discursive structures are the building blocks of identity. For instance, if a subject is assigned an injurious name, such as "queer," that assignation will be "violent" to the subject to the extent to which it invites physical violence from others, or limits the freedom the subject enjoys to take his or her place in the social order. On the other hand, the subject still has the capacity to choose to recontextualize the injurious label and treat it as an affirmation instead of denigration. Being called a "queer" may hurt my feelings, but my feelings aren't composed of neurochemicals, they are symbolic and linguistic scripts that write me into the story of my life. So, if I experience emotional pain, it is because I don't like how the other has authored my self-image. My recourse is to borrow language from other, more favorable narratives in order rewrite my queerness as a mark of positive distinction, and embody it as such in my public performance of self.

---

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that in her most recent work, Butler has moved closer to acknowledging the intersection of the symbolic and the affective registers, and her forthcoming collaboration with Malabou may provide us with clarification concerning her understanding of the significance of the pre-linguistic proto-self. For the purposes of this dissertation, I am focusing primarily on *Gender Trouble* and *Excitable Speech*, because the ideas expressed in those works continue to exert massive influence on cultural and rhetorical theorists interested in the problem of rhetorical violence.

Butler insists on the symbolic character of the violence engendered by rhetoric because she wants to oppose the theory of the performative employed by legal theoreticians such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon, who claim, “representations have the power to enact what they depict, and should therefore be censored” (Salih 108). Butler maintains a temporal and categorical distinction between the expression of violent rhetoric, such as hate speech, and the potentially deleterious effects it has on the audience, because the absence of such a gap would eliminate the potential for resistance: if subjects are immediately constituted by language, there is no space in which they can refuse to accept or subvert the terms implied in that language.

If powerful individuals and institutions engage in symbolic violence when they impose restrictive labels on people, nevertheless, we cannot assume that the intended audiences of that hate speech necessarily interpret the violent rhetoric in the manner that was intended by the speaker. Butler’s theory of critical agency rests on the possibility that people to whom hate speech is directed may repurpose, rather than recoil from, violent rhetoric, and thereby turn the tables on their would-be oppressors. Butler writes:

The gap that separates the speech act from its future effects...begins a theory of linguistic agency that provides an alternative to the restless search for legal remedy. The interval between instances of utterance not only makes the repetition and resignification of the utterance possible, but shows how words might, through time, become disjointed by their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes” (1997: 15).

The corollary of this optimistic stance is that producers of hate speech cannot be held fully accountable for their rhetorical violence. Because subjects retain a degree of agency in their ability to resignify hate speech, the wounding that hate speakers intend to enact is never assured, and never predictable; therefore, the speaker cannot be identified as guilty

of violence because the effects of rhetorical violence, unlike those of physical violence, can never be located in an observable material form.

Butler breaks with the moral causality between subject and act that is taken for granted by the law and argues that both the originators and recipients of speech are not pre-constituted biological agents, but rather, they are constructions of rhetoric—Butler calls these subjects a “belated metalepsis,” or subject-effect (1997: 50). Hate speakers are no more to blame for their speech than victims are to blame for the speech directed against them because social linguistic practices produce both parties—they are links on a citational chain that precedes them. Put very simply, according to Butler, the “word of the law requires someone or something to blame in cases of hate speech or obscenity, so it points the finger at something *it creates* in order to prosecute” (Salih 105). Butler renders it impossible to identify who or what is culpable for, or wounded by, hate speech, and encourages us to turn our attention away from individuals and their bodies and towards the linguistic system that constructs the *ideas* of individualism and corporeality. Rather than censor texts or punish purveyors of violent rhetoric, Butler claims, “it is more effective to engage in the difficult effort of reading those texts against themselves” (Salih 109).

But for subject to read a text against itself, and resignify its meaning, that subject must make a conscious decision to do so. This requires a great deal of emotional fortitude of the sort that is only available to those who are gifted with the symbolic resources necessary to resignify violent rhetoric. To speak of critical agency as a process of willfully (mis)reading injurious language is to presume access to both alternative narrative structures from which the subject may draw to resignify meaning, and,

inseparably, the agential capacity to intentionally override and redirect the affects of hurt and rage into linguistic channels. At the core of this presumption is confidence that symbolic thought produces affect, rather than the other way around: I am hurt when I am called “faggot” because I know that word is meant to wound me, but by the same token, I can alleviate that hurt by consciously holding that designation as a point of pride and solidarity. What if, however, I do not live in a culture in which there are other “faggots” with which I can imaginatively or physically commune? What if my identity is constructed by the affective component of injurious language, so that I cannot conceive of reconceiving of myself as something other than degraded?

Here we come to the question of who, or what, we address when we attempt to instruct subjects on the techniques of critical reading and reflexive self-consciousness that would allow them to read injurious texts against themselves. If there is no subjectivity or identity before interpellation into the social field, than there is no entity that can experience symbolic violence until that entity is constituted by symbolicity. Nevertheless, the subject must come into existence through some originary impetus that precedes entry into the symbolic—otherwise, who or what would heed the initial call from the symbolic order? The possibility of the subject’s eventual experience of selfhood must be initiated by some pre-linguistic animating presence that intrinsically desires self-preservation and individuation. Butler allows “that although agents are socially constructed through the cultural ascription of multiple subject-positions, nonetheless, the intentionality behind these...performances is driven by a desire for self-identity” (Boucher 120-121). What feels this desire? Butler suggests that the root of the intentionality by which subjects engage in first, the original move towards the symbolic

order, and later, counterhegemonic performances and readings, is located in the primary narcissism of auto-affection: she claims that the “I” comes “into social being ... because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence” (1997: 104). Diane Davis explains that Butler is referring to a “preoriginary rhetoricity” that is based in the “very first ‘emotional tie’” that is “formative of the ego—so we’re really talking about the ‘passionate attachment,’ ... something or someone who doesn’t yet exist, a relation (without relation) to the other that is older than and productive of the relation to the self” (2010: 26). Once this auto-affective impulse enters into the symbolic order, Butler maintains that it becomes capable of resignifying wounding words within the temporal gap between utterance and act.

Geoff Boucher astutely points out that there is a contradiction between Butler’s postulate that the speaking and thinking “I” is a linguistic construct, and her claim that there is an agential animating impulse that precedes discursivity (122). Butler claims that identity is always a doing-with-symbols, yet it seems that the body is doing something prior to its apprehension of the symbolic tools of language: it is evincing an affective attachment to life. Boucher writes, “in developing her apparently social constructivist theory of subjectless agency, Butler has not, in actuality, dispensed with the assumption of a pre-discursive individuality. She has only translated the register of its existence, from self-knowledge, to auto-affection” (121). Yet as soon as she raises the specter of a pre-discursive, affective body, she flushes it from the scene, and channels it into the trap of the symbolic order. At the same time, she strategically revivifies the auto-affective entity when she is called upon to answer *why* a subject would want to subvert hegemony through performance: it is because the subject is still driven by an affective desire for

self-preservation and recognition, and this desire can break through socio-linguistic restraints and compel the subject to act. For Boucher, Butler's insistence on auto-affectation is problematic because it leads her to "neglect the material aspects of the social formation" (133). Echoing Bourdieu's criticism of Butler, Boucher believes that her faith in the "pre-social kernel" of the auto-affective impulse allows her to circumnavigate the ways in which power and ideology can trample a subject's will for transformation.<sup>31</sup> I agree, but would add that Boucher's critique is weakened by his unwillingness to address the neurological aspects of the social formation. The pre-social kernel may be synonymous with the pre-linguistic brain, which is vulnerable to symbolic violence.

We might ask: if the body is "affectable," and imbued with a will-to-identity before it can recognize or use language, why should we assume that this pre-linguistic, affectable, agential pre-subject disappears once the being enters into the realm of symbolicity? Moreover, why should we assume the agential body is not capable of being wounded by socio-linguistic experience in ways that impede the subject's ability to engage in the resignification of wounding words? In the next section, I will explore the possibility that the pre-subject of which Butler speaks may be productively read through Malabou's concept of the proto-self, what Damasio calls "the ensemble of brain devices which continuously and *nonconsciously* maintain the body within the narrow range and relative stability required for survival. These devices continually represent, *nonconsciously*, the state of the living body, within its many dimensions"; they are "the nonconscious forerunner for the levels of self which appear in our minds as the conscious

---

<sup>31</sup> With specific reference to Butler, Bourdieu writes of those characteristics "which, deeply rooted in things (structures) and in bodies, are not negated by a simple act of verbal naming and are not to be abolished by an act of performative magic" (1998: 110).

protagonists of consciousness: core self and autobiographical self' (2000: 22, emphasis in original)

While the register of being that experiences auto-affection may lack the symbolic tools to engage in self-reflective thought, it is nevertheless apparently capable of signifying things to itself, even before it has access to language. We might then surmise that language is neither the only coding system by which we render experience communicable to the self and others—affect also informs us about ourselves—nor is it the exclusive currency of rhetorical violence.

The challenge for critical rhetoricians is to heed Butler's warning about the political danger that inheres in a theory of rhetorical violence that too tightly ties representation with action, for this opens the door for censorship; at the same time, we must be attentive to the vulnerabilities of the human body that Butler perhaps too easily glosses over in a dogged attempt to preserve the possibility for agential resignification and resistance. Bourdieu begins to draw our attention to these vulnerabilities, but he does so in a way that closes down critical efforts to intervene in symbolic violence before they've been inaugurated. For Bourdieu, the problem of critics such as Butler is that they disembody subjectivity, suspend it airily in the flows and redirections of language. What Bourdieu does not account for, however, is the plasticity of the brain, its capacity to reconfigure its circuitry in response to changed circumstances, and the corresponding alterations these plastic changes bring to consciousness and affective disposition. If we are to formulate a theory that brings together Butler's optimism for social change and Bourdieu's cautious view of the body and its hidden vulnerabilities, we might begin by

reconsidering the theory of the social construction of subjectivity that undergirds both of their theories of symbolic violence.

Butler's understanding of the subject as something constituted in language leads her to underestimate the degree to which bodies are vulnerable to wounds that strike below the register of linguistic signification, and therefore potentially impact the capacity of afflicted subjects to engage in subversive acts of resistance. To explore these vulnerabilities, I'll argue, we need to locate the "scene of the crime" of violence in the auto-affective proto-self that exists prior to signification. Butler believes the proto-self is "insignificant" because it does not respond to, or use, language; therefore, it cannot be wounded by social experience. For Butler, the proto-self is a means to an end; it serves as a launching pad from which the nascent being achieves subjectivity. However, if the proto-self could be shown to perform agential operations, then it would follow that social forces could also curtail its agency, which is to say, it would be vulnerable to violence. Neuroscientific evidence suggests that the proto-self doesn't transform into a linguistic self upon entry into the social order, as a pupa blossoms into a butterfly. Rather, the proto-self coexists with the linguistic self, throughout life, and changes in one register of being effect changes in the other.

### **The Neuronal Subject**

Catherine Malabou claims we can locate a proto-self that exists prior to signification in the brain. She writes that the proto-self is a "pre-conscious biological precedent out of which alone can be developed the sense of self...and the temporal and historical permanence of the subject" (Malabou 2008: 59). The proto-self emerges as the neural

cells multiply and enable the nascent being to receive and produce symbolic thought and expression. The result is neither a biologically pre-determined being, nor one that is wholly constructed by socio-linguistic practices. Rather, “the transition from a purely biological entity to a mental entity takes place in the struggle of the one against the other, producing the truth of their relation (Malabou 2008: 81). According to Malabou, contemporary neuroscience allows us to rethink the dynamics of subjectivity so that the singular individual isn’t always already under erasure, but is produced and affirmed instead. However, to suggest that subjectivity is a neural phenomenon does not mean it is ever stable or permanent condition, because the brain is constantly being reconfigured by social experience. Indeed, as Malabou notes, “neuronal functioning and social functioning interdetermine each other and mutually give each other form...to the point where it is no longer possible to distinguish them” (2008: 8). In other words, social experience, including rhetorical activity, shapes thought and perception by constituting and reconstituting the neural circuitry that produces consciousness and affect.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, within the body, prior to entry into the social symbolic order, representational activity takes place via the feedback loop by which the proto-self monitors the state of the total organism. Damasio explains:

The proto-self is a coherent collection of neuronal patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions. This ceaselessly maintained first-order collection of neuronal occurs not in one brain place but in many, at a multiplicity of levels, from the brain stem to the cerebral cortex, in structures interconnected by neuronal pathways. These structures are intimately involved in the process of regulating the state of the organism. The operations of acting on the organism and of sensing the state of the organism are closely tied. (2000: 154)

To review: the proto-self, while not linguistic, nevertheless communicates with itself. It represents itself to itself with a virtual body image that it constantly compares to the

information relayed by the material body. Changes in the material body brought about by events in the external world compel the proto-self to make corresponding alterations in the body map, and to initiate affective states. Affect is the way the brain modifies itself. Affects allow the proto-self to prepare the body to assume a somatic state appropriate for the exigencies of social experience. For example, in threatening situations, the proto-self induces anger or fear. These feelings then impact the cognitive stance a subject assumes, narrowing or expanding the subject's capacity for reflective thought based on the demands of the situation. We cannot consciously apprehend these internal processes, but nevertheless they occur, and influence our perception of, and behavior in response to, external events.

Malabou argues that “to speak of cerebral auto-affection...is to admit that the brain is capable of looking at itself, touching itself as it constitutes its own image...it operates as a kind of mirror within which the brain sees itself live” (2012: 42). The image of the mirror here has twofold significance; in fact, we might think of it as a two-way mirror that cleaves and connects biological and social experience. On one side of the mirror, the brain looks at its physical self, and compares that to the internal representation of itself that it holds in the body image. On the other side the mirror, the brain looks at other people, or representations of other people, and mimics what it sees. The cells in the brain that engage in this mimesis are called “mirror neurons.” Davis explains that

what is so interesting about [mirror neurons] is that they act as both sensory and motor neurons, firing in association not only with the execution but also with the observation of an action. This means that the same mirror neurons fire in my brain whether I actually grab a pencil myself or I see you grab one, indicating no capacity to distinguish between my grasping hand and what is typically (and hastily) described as a visual representation of it: your grasping hand. (2008: 131)

Davis uses mirror neurons to deconstruct the Burkean notion that rhetorical identification occurs purely in the psychic/symbolic realm. Mirror neurons shatter “the presumption of an originary biological disconnect between self and other,” because they indicate that “identification surely does not depend on shared meaning: a mimetic rapport precedes understanding, affection precedes projection” (Davis 2008: 131). If this is the case, then subjectivity cannot be understood as something that only comes about *after* entry into the symbolic, at the moment when the nascent being recognizes itself in opposition to the Other of its representation. Instead, there is a neuronal subjectivity, or proto-self, that is capable of being affected by external events at level prior to signification. This suggests a human capacity to be “‘directly and immediately’ induced to action or attitude by another, sans all logical foundation and cognitive discretion; it involves a non-representable and each time originary identification that takes place behind the back and beyond the reach of critical faculties” (Davis 2008: 140).

Just as the Butlerian subject is always in the process of being rewritten by flows of language emerging from multiple sites of power, the proto-self “emerges dynamically and continuously out of multifarious interacting signals that span varied orders of the nervous system” (Damasio 2000: 154). This dispels the Cartesian myth of the “ghost in the machine,” because there is no central authorial presence in the brain; the proto-self is a product of communication between various agencies dispersed throughout the organism, and between these agencies and the external world. While the proto-self is embodied in neural circuitry, it is not static or settled, for neural circuitry is plastic and open to reconfiguration, through rhetorical activity that connects inner and outer worlds. Damasio writes, “The story contained in the images [of the proto-self] is not told by some

clever homunculus. Nor is the story told by you as a self because the core of you is born as the story is told, within the story itself” (2000: 191). This observation should prompt us to rethink the narrative processes upon which critical rhetoricians focus critical efforts, as the proto-self is as vulnerable to suggestion, and violence, as is our linguistic self—indeed, there is a dialogue between these two intertwined modes of subjectivity that often passes under the radar of critics.

One implication of the imbrication of the linguistic and proto selves is that we must pay close attention to how effects in one produce corresponding effects in the other. This runs contrary to the tendency in the humanities to employ a top-down approach to cultural phenomena, whereby changes in mentality are assumed to produce changes in affect and behavior, and to the tendency in the sciences to start from the “bottom” of evolutionary biological imperatives and work “up” to thought and attitude. Rather, we might consider affect as a force or language that mediates between the top and bottom. Malabou argues that our emotions constitute “the most sensitive point of our fragility”; they are an “absolutely vulnerable zone” that “can be wounded at any moment” (Malabou 2012: 48). Malabou is not here weightlessly reiterating commonsensical idea that we all “sensitive,” that our feelings are “easily hurt.” Rather, she is pushing criticism into the folds of the brain, to the cerebral sites associated with emotion, for the purpose of illuminating the ways in which social events that excite or inhibit affect *physically* wound the plastic brain. These wounds, in turn, influence our capacity to emotionally withstand or appropriately respond to other social events.

Malabou explains, “[H]igh-level cognitive processes—such as language, memory, reason, or attention—are not necessary for the constitution of the ‘proto-self.’ These

functions are, however, structurally linked to emotional processes, and the selective reduction of emotion is just as damaging to rationality as excessive emotion” (2012: 47). The structures that link them are synaptic connections that facilitate communication between neural circuits. When internal communication breaks down, there is a corresponding change in subjectivity—“the self is likely to begin to disintegrate” (LeDoux 2002: 323). What might cause such a communication breakdown? Any traumatic event that induces disconnection between brain regions, leading to a shift in the balance of power by which excessive reason or emotion assume a role of dominance in the cerebral domain.

The neuronal subject can be damaged both by physical and symbolic injury—both may be considered forms of violence, as both are materially manifested in neural matter. As Malabou explains, neuroscience shows us that “the difference between ‘material’ and ‘psychic’ is very thin, perhaps even non-existing”; accordingly, the border between physical and mental injury cannot hold, because both forms of trauma cause “material destruction” in the brain, which “obviously and undeniably implies psychic alteration and modifications” (Malabou qtd. in Vahanian 8). Taken further, we are almost constantly confronted with traumas of greater or lesser degrees of intensity, so we face the risk of the loss of our sense of self at every moment. Malabou call this “the great metaphysical lesson of neurobiology today: not to consider brain damage as an isolated possibility, rare things that happen in hospitals, but to consider them as a constant possibility” (qtd. in Vahanian 9).

The concept of trauma that Malabou introduces is different from the one developed in the psychoanalytic tradition. According to Freud, trauma “is traumatic only

to the extent that it triggers an internal conflict that exists before it” (Malabou 2012: 79). From a Freudian perspective, a soldier who returns from combat and exhibits the disaffection that characterizes what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was not traumatized by the gruesome scenes she witnessed on the battlefield; rather, the emotion aroused by these scenes overwhelmed the soldier’s mind and broke down the defense mechanisms by which she repressed painful sexual memories from his past. The shattered psyche permits buried suffering to seep into consciousness. Freud explains, “We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside that are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (18: 29). As I detailed in the last chapter, Freud did not believe emotionally traumatic experiences caused a physical disturbance in circuitry of the brain because he maintained that the brain lacks the physical equipment to represent itself to itself; therefore, it displaces excessively stimulating impulses into the representations that constitute the psyche. Therefore, emotional trauma is played out on the psychic/symbolic stage, and the physical brain is merely the material foundation on which that stage is built. “The psychical regime of events, for Freud, is autonomous; it does not depend upon any organic causes—especially not upon cerebral causes. This autonomy manifests itself precisely through the independence of fantasmic work whose only creative resources come from the psyche and not the brain” (Malabou 2012: 98).

Developments in what we know about the brain and its relation to cognitive psychology lead contemporary scientists to insist that traumatic events create lesions in material structure of the brain, and thus create a new identity for the subject. If traumatic events do awaken buried memories, the act of recalling the past will necessarily alter the content and vision of that which is being recalled. Because neuronal subjectivity is

always in the process of being reconstituted by social experience, the identity a subject contingently assumes in the present will influence how the subject interprets his or her past. A traumatized individual will not bear the same relation to his former self as he did before the experience of trauma. Malabou writes, “The traumatic event, in a certain sense, invents its subject. The past of the traumatized individual changes, becomes another past...Accordingly, a new subject enters the scene in order to assume this past that never took place” (2012: 152). This insight has had profound effects for how therapists understand and treat post-traumatic stress disorder, which is now understood not as a psychic disorder rooted in sexual etiology, but a neurological one, brought about by changes in the neural circuitry that governs affect. In traumatic disorders, the neuronal structures that fit affect into a regulatory framework based on social norms are fractured by events that reveal the arbitrary nature, and inadequacy, of those frameworks.

Few of us have the misfortune of being subjected to the horrors of war. Of what relevance are the neurocognitive problems of soldiers to everyday citizens? Malabou makes the provocative claim that post-traumatic stress is now a general social condition, “a *universal* state of stress,” occasioned by a contemporary sociopolitical scene that relentlessly presents subjects with “the absence of sense” (2012: 155). Noting that terrorist attacks and unprovoked wars share a characteristic dearth of clearly defined goals, motives, lessons, or responsible parties, she declares that we have “entered a new age of political violence in which politics is defined by the renunciation of endowing violence with a political sense” (Malabou 2012: 155). We might say that violence is rendered traumatic when it exceeds the interpretive frames through which we understand it. If I am unfaithful to my partner and she hits me, I understand why she acted violently.

If, however, I am in a loving relationship and my partner hits me and leaves without explanation, I may be traumatized, because my affect cannot be mapped with an explanatory schema. This is based on the same neurological principles at work in phantom limb syndrome: a communication breakdown between cognitive and affective elements of the brain and body engendered by external events bring about a radical disruption of a subject's (illusory) sense of a stable identity. Furthermore, what is true of a severed relationship or a severed limb also applies to the severance between expectations and events in the political domain. When a terrorist attack opens up a disjuncture between Americans' collective positive self-image, and the negative image held of America by a significant portion of the world's inhabitants, American brains could be said to be traumatized, even if they were not directly touched by burning debris.

Given the ubiquity of violent political events, and the constancy of our exposure to their images, we cannot pinpoint exactly which one of them represents *the* traumatic event; “the multiform presence of the absence of any responsible instance or author makes *the natural catastrophe of contemporary politics* into a daily occurrence” (Malabou 2012: 155, emphasis in original). Analyses of political violence need to consider events as serial occurrences that traumatize because they continually prevent violence from ever being fully captured in a secure interpretive schema.

We are not neurologically equipped to respond with what we might consider an appropriate sense of shame and outrage to the violent images and words that confront us every day on the screens with which we are surrounded. The human brain is designed to produce bursts of strong feeling in the face of occasional encounters with stressful circumstances. When threat and fear become the norm rather than an anomaly, the plastic

brain organizes itself to accommodate the excess of affect that threat and fear evoke, minimizing affective output so as to maintain a state of homeostatic equilibrium. As a result, we assume the attitudinal symptoms that were once attributed to the “shell shock” exhibited by traumatized warriors: disaffectedness, passivity, and a general lack of empathic identification with other beings.

Violence, in the broadest sense, occurs when social conditions forcefully disrupt the in-built human neurological disposition to unconsciously identify with the suffering of others. Malabou claims this condition is a product of “the heterogeneous mixture of nature and politics at work in all types of violence, this mixture where politics is annulled as such so that it assumes the face of nature and where nature disappears beneath the mask of politics. *This globalized heterogeneous mixture of nature and politics is brought to light by the worldwide uniformity of neuropsychological reactions*” (2012: 156, emphasis in original). Rhetoricians tend to be constitutionally adverse to such universalizing claims. However, the basic neurological principles that make people vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder operate in all neurologically intact subjects—we are all vulnerable to the brain damage wrought by exposure to affectively charged words and images. The performative styles with which subjects express political disaffection may vary according to socially constructed, culturally specific norms, but the underlying neurophysiological operations that cause trauma can be said to be consistent across cultures, because they occur at a register of experience that precedes language and cognition.

Of course, there are many varieties of traumatic events available to subjects. Some we eagerly seek out, such as excitingly violent films, television shows, music, and

games, and some are foisted upon us, such as bullying, hate speech, prejudicial treatment, and physical assault. It is worth noting, however, that the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of exposure to various modes of trauma tend to be strikingly consistent.<sup>32</sup> As Malabou asks, “how could we not be struck by the obvious similarity between the general comportment and behavior of a social outcast and a person with a brain lesion? How could we avoid drawing a connection between neuropathological disaffection and ‘disaffiliation’?” (2012: 159). The congruencies between people who have suffered brain injuries, and those who have suffered social marginalization, could be attributable to the fact that, at the microscopic level, emotional distress caused by rhetorical or symbolic affronts to one’s social standing is manifested in neurological injuries—a deformation of the neural circuitry with which the brain represents itself to itself that effects what amounts to an ontological change in the subject’s conscious thought. This could shed new light on the reasons some individuals commit acts of physical violence by helping us to overcome the reductive dichotomies of rhetorical and physical violence. It may be that rhetorical violence is not an *incitement to* physical violence: rhetorical violence *is* physical violence.

### **The Politics of Rhetorical Violence**

The political implications of rhetorical theories of violence that segregate the physical from the symbolic become apparent when we examine the public debates that

---

<sup>32</sup> I do not mean to imply that playing a violent video game and being the target of hate speech are equivalent in terms of violent impact. My point is that both of these events are “violent” insofar as they alter neural circuitry, and that one’s vulnerability to such violence is increased if one lacks the neural make-up required to buffer these experiences with countervailing thoughts and emotions. What is often colloquially called “moral fiber” is correlated to nerve fibers in the brain. When we speak of moral fiber, we often think of this as a self-cultivated or self-abandoned quality, and reduce it to decisions a subject chooses to make. If we articulate moral decision-making to neuroplastic brain development, we see that a subject’s capacity to make complicated judgments is dependent on choices others have made concerning what areas of the brain the subject is allowed to develop.

inevitably follow after shocking instances of public violence, such as Loughner's killing spree in Arizona. Participants in these debates tend to formulate explanatory theories that gravitate towards opposing poles of a dyad that pits rhetorical inducement versus neuropathology, which is in essence a restaging of the nurture versus nature dichotomy that still has tremendous currency as a terministic screen through which all questions concerning violent behavior tend to be filtered in the public arena.

Those who adhere to an ideology of rugged individualism tend to dismiss the notion that social forces, including rhetoric, impact acts of judgment. We can witness this attitude played out in the responses right-wing political pundits offered to the charge that their violent rhetoric somehow influenced Jared Loughner to massacre people gathered at Gifford's rally. Tucson conservative radio host Jon Justice said, "There isn't any correlation...This is a crazy person! Politics is out the window — [Loughner is] a nutbag! No amount of controlling talk radio is going to change that!" Another conservative Arizona radio personality, Barry Young, said: "[Progressives critics] are telling us that we have to make sure our words and phrases don't incite crazy people. I have one problem with that: They're crazy" (qtd. in Dolnick and Williams). Katie Pavlich, editor of the popular conservative website Townhall.com, answers "[H]ysterical liberal arguments that Loughner was somehow influenced by right-wing hateful rhetoric," with a very succinct retort: "Loughner is crazy. End of story." This is a sentiment shared by right-wing media pundit Bill O'Reilly, who wrote: "The killer, Jared Loughner, is a psychopath. Civilization has always had them and always will. There is no solution to the likes of Loughner." O'Reilly goes on to say that "equating mass murder with rhetoric" is "Unbelievable." Likewise, former Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin

blithely dismissed “those who claim political rhetoric is to blame for the despicable act of this deranged, apparently apolitical criminal.”<sup>33</sup> As support for her stance, Palin cited President Ronald Reagan’s pronouncement, “*We must reject the idea that every time a law’s broken, society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker.*” The public, it seems, found the right wing explanation convincing: a CBS News poll found that only 32% of Americans believed that there was a link between violent political rhetoric and the Loughner’s actions. Sixty-nine percent of Republicans said there was no connection, while 19% said it was in some way related. Among Democrats, 42% saw a connection between violent rhetoric and the events Tucson, compared to 49% who said the two were unrelated (Carty).

The American public, it seems, generally adheres to a materialist epistemology pithily encapsulated in the nursery rhyme that encourages children to believe that sticks and stones may break their bones, but words can never hurt them. Rhetoricians flip this folk wisdom on its head, and maintain that words can indeed hurt people, by virtue of their representational qualities, directing people’s attention to certain aspects of reality while deflecting others. From this perspective, language does not damage people physically; rather, it constitutes the social and psychological conditions by which people may get the idea that it is ethically or morally justifiable to enact physical violence against other people. This view overlooks the possibility that symbols can themselves act violently, by physically altering the communication networks that link the brain and the body, and connect brain-bodies with the external world.

---

<sup>33</sup> It must be noted that in the same essay in which Palin dismisses rhetoric’s power to incite violence, she also argues that “*journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn. That is reprehensible.*” The irony, presumably, was lost on Palin.

It is superficially satisfying to posit rhetoric as an alternative to physical violence. Doing so implicitly frames rhetorical critics as potential peacemakers, and thus makes a case for our continued relevance in public affairs. However, there are significant drawbacks to advocating a purely symbolic theory of rhetorical violence. If we lose sight of the body's organic vulnerability, and position language as a force that is influential but immaterial, then when it comes to addressing the relationship between rhetorical violence and physical violence, we can only speculate about what words or tropes seem to have inspired aggressive behavior. The issue has most commonly been approached from a preventive point of view—namely, by calling for censorship of the “words that wound.” But as Butler has argued, censorship by the state is hardly a productive answer, because to trust state institutions such as the law with the role of a sole arbiter who decides what utterances are to be legitimately considered harmful, is to deny an individual an experience of critical agency with which to assess things by him or herself.

One manifestation of the censorial impulse is the call for greater “civility” in public discourse, a particularly popular gesture among rhetoricians, especially in the wake of political violence that is linked to rhetoric (Aune 2011: 432). The problem with this, as Joshua Gunn points out, is that “the repeated and often passionate calls for more ‘civil’ public discourse is often just an appeal for the appearance of procedural civility in a manifestly uncivil, disrespectful, or otherwise oppressive state of affairs.”<sup>34</sup> Civility can operate as a mode of self-censorship, and can be wielded as a rhetorical weapon by those who wish to marginalize challenging voices—one man's earnest demand for recognition can be read by another man as an “uncivilized” declaration of hostility, and as such, the

---

<sup>34</sup> “Symbolic Violence.” The Blogora: Rhetoric Society of America. 5 March 2012.

call for civility can itself be a form of violence, insofar as it may become inadvertently implicated in the silencing that is often a precursor for outbursts of physical violence.<sup>35</sup> Speaking to the discursive aftermath of the Loughner killings, Erik Doxtader argues, “the call for citizens to make a pledge to civility is a reply to the affront of rhetorical appearances that abstains from an underlying question of the word’s response-ability” (421). Civility often functions as a way to temporarily avoid or mask the problem of violence rather than address it in all its complexities, and “out-right denunciations of violence may foreclose rather than protect the agency of its victims” (Rand 476). Arguably, violence is valuable to critical and activist endeavors—when faced with oppression and the abuse of power, acts of intervention directed towards disrupting structures of power and erecting new ones in their place necessarily involve some imposition of rhetorical force that may be justifiably described as violence.

As we endeavor to formulate a full-bodied theory of rhetoric violence, we must bear in mind Bourdieu’s lessons concerning the deeply embodied, unconscious pull of ideological habit; otherwise, we run the risk of reinforcing the “scholastic illusion” that “‘raising consciousness’ will create liberation, failing to recognize the inertia which results from the inscription of social structures in bodies” (Aune 2011: 433). Attention to both the social structures that produce ideology, and to the corporeal structures that are materially constituted to reproduce ideology, are necessary if we’re to make a clear assessment of the depth and breadth of ideology’s reach. Following Malabou’s arguments

---

<sup>35</sup> For a forceful refutation of the call for “civility” in rhetoric, see Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009). The authors specifically respond to Foss and Griffin’s theory of invitational rhetoric, and note that in some contexts, such as the pedagogical situation and in discussions among material equals, invitation is appropriate; in others, however, this approach can be disabling to the oppressed” (222).

concerning the neuronal subject, we see that “symbolic violence” has direct physical effects on the corporeal body; therefore, time-honored distinctions such as those routinely held between rhetoric and violence, and between symbolicity and materiality, are rendered porous. This should increase our sensitivity to modes of violence that normally go unrecognized because they are “merely” representations of violence, not *real* violence.

I submit that critical agency that stems from knowledge of the brain’s malleability might be the path towards a more affirmative approach to countering violence. We might begin by reconceptualizing what we mean when we speak of “brain damage.” Damage, whether the term refers to the structure of a building or the structure of a mind, usually implies an assertive force enacted against a stable structure that results in a negative deformation of an idealized original form. When this understanding of damage is applied to human beings, the address of violence comes either after the event of its occurrence—“justice” as a matter of revenge—or before its occurrence by way of pre-diction (an expression of abuse is prevented before it has a chance to take form). In either case, the locus of responsibility is placed decisively on individual subjects, rather than on the social structures that produced them as subjects. If we agree that individual subjects are symbolic expressions produced by the brain (both in terms of the “I” expressed internally to the self in consciousness, and the “he/she/it” recognized externally in social and public affairs), and that the flourishing of the brain’s potential is not guaranteed by the mere fact of its existence, but is dependent in substantial ways on access to symbolic resources, then individuals and institutions which deny those resources must also be considered as possible perpetrators of violence.

Brain damage must not only be recognized as an intrusion upon an established form, such as a blow to the head, or an injurious epithet directed against one's social identity. Brain damage should also encompass the intentional withholding of the symbolic materials required by the subject to construct a brain capable of withstanding the unavoidable violences of social life. These violences are "unavoidable" because the brain is always already being manipulated and physically reconfigured by forces that act upon it without the consent of the conscious subject. Technically, a rhetoric of peace and love "violently" impacts neural networks in the same manner as a rhetoric of anger and aggression—there is no escaping this kind of violence, but there are ways of buffering its effects. Taken further, if a subject is exposed only to the former rhetoric, at the expense of the latter, he or she is rendered more dangerously exposed and vulnerable to suggestion and control than if he or she was subjected to the affective turbulence that follows from a cacophony of contradictory directives. This claim can be grounded in neuroscientific evidence.<sup>36</sup> The cultivation of confusion compels the brain to engage in a cognitive struggle with complexity, and complex cognition is, quite literally, the lifeblood of dense neuronal connectivity in the prefrontal cortex, the region of the brain responsible for critical thinking, skepticism, and self-reflexivity. If these connections are not regularly activated, they die out, and so too does the subject's capacity to resignify or refuse to accept rhetorical propositions.

Let me be clear: it is not my intention to simply claim that all rhetorical exchanges are equally "violent," even though they may all reconfigure neural networks.

---

<sup>36</sup> It is not my intention to uncritically proclaim the superiority of scientific "truths" to those contingently arrived upon through social and rhetorical activity. Rather, I raise the issue of scientific evidence not as ontological claim, but an epistemological and rhetorical one: for better or worse, scientific data carries great weight in public opinion, and as such, should be marshaled in critical efforts to intervene in politic affairs in the spirit of Gayatri Spivak's call for "strategic essentialism."

Certainly there is a significant difference between rhetorical activity that communicates acceptance and goodwill, and rhetoric that degrades and delegitimizes. The problem that inheres in attempting to determine rhetoric's violent character according to the intent of the speaker, or the reception of the addressee, is that the statuses of intent and reception are conceptually overdetermined. As poststructuralist theorists remind us, what one intends by a message may not correspond with the other's interpretation of that message. Attempts to pin down "violent" meaning expose us to the same risks that attend the call for civility in discourse: what is violent, or uncivil, is in the eye of the beholder, and if we grant the power to determine meaning to juridical bodies, we invite censorship and the reification of potentially oppressive normative codes of morality. These are precisely the things that a neurorhetorical theory of violence aims to counter.

If we stretch the term violence too far, it becomes meaningless, and open to appropriation by any group that wishes to silence the challenging or transgressive rhetoric of another group. I contend that violence does not necessarily inhere in epithets, slurs, or condemnations, even though such linguistic forms may hurt the feelings of the people they are directed against, and alter their neural pathways. Rather, violence occurs when subjects are not allowed access to contradictory discourses that can disperse the impact of violent speech. For illustration, let's consider the matter of so-called "brainwashing," the "most commonly used word for the process whereby a charismatic group systematically induces high levels of ideological obedience" (Zablocki 160). This is a term that is largely ignored or discredited by contemporary rhetoricians, most likely because it implicitly evacuates agency from the scene, and because it is often wielded by

reactionary conservative critics to incite panic about the predominance of liberal ideology in the university classroom.<sup>37</sup>

However, we find instances of brainwashing with disturbing regularity, often involving the abduction of children by charismatic adults. In such cases, media commentators often puzzle over the fact that the abducted youth did not escape when given the opportunity.<sup>38</sup> Confusion as to why abductees seem to lack agency in these situations may be due to a general undervaluation of rhetoric's neuro-constitutive power. In a context in which a subject is repeatedly presented with one set of rhetorical claims, and deprived of competing claims, the subject cannot enact agential refusal indefinitely because the neural networks that enable them to conceive of alternatives to their present predicament die out from disuse, and the networks that represent the subject's new reality become stronger and colonize the space previously occupied by the neglected circuitry. As neuroscientist and philosopher Kathleen Taylor explains in her discussion of brainwashing, "Beliefs are mental objects in the sense that they are embedded in the brain. If you challenge them by contradiction, or just by cutting them off from the stimuli that make you think about them, then they are going to weaken slightly. If that is combined with very strong reinforcement of new beliefs, then you're going to get a shift in emphasis from one to the other" (qtd. in Jha). Rhetorical techniques that induce brainwashing include isolating the individual and controlling their access to information,

---

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009)

<sup>38</sup> For example, conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly raised eyebrows when he said of Shawn Hornbeck—who was abducted at the age of 11, held for four years, and was found in Missouri in 2007—that "there was an element here that this kid liked about this circumstances" and that he "do[esn't] buy" "the Stockholm syndrome thing." O'Reilly held out the possibility that Hornbeck made "a conscious decision to accept his captivity because" his kidnapper "made things easy for him. No school, play all day long."

challenging their belief structure and creating doubt, and repeating messages in a pressurized environment (Jha). Within this set of discursive practices, we cannot identify a specific instance of rhetoric that is “violent,” because the damage words are capable of inflicting is dependent on the social environment that is set up to ensure that their violent potential is realized. A powerful figure, whether he is a cult leader, a politician, or a peer, may call us a derogatory name, but unless the conditions are set by which we have little or no access to any other means of framing our self-identity, such injunctions will most likely have limited violent effect. On the other hand, if we are simultaneously assigned an identity and prevented access to other possible identifications, we are rendered neurologically vulnerable to a degree that may cancel out our capacity to refuse the assignation. The critical theory of rhetorical violence that I am promoting is focused on the systematic establishment of social contexts characterized by the *elimination* of rhetorics that produce cognitive dissonance. It is healthy to undergo challenges to our sense of self, even if those challenges are emotionally disruptive. The real danger lies in rhetorics that consolidate and stabilize subjectivity, because this engenders an uncritical condition whereby subjects passively accede to the status quo of their present circumstances.

The advantage of incorporating the concepts of deprivation and lack into a rhetorical theory of violence is that it broadens attention, and increases sensitivity to, instances of violence that otherwise escape commentary for lack of an adequate vocabulary with which to talk about them. We begin to see that, at a macropolitical level, rhetorical acts by the state which consistently frame a group as dangerous or undesirable, and suppress counterarguments through force of censorship, libel, or slander

are, in neurologically material ways, acts of violence through denial in and of themselves, and should be rhetorically addressed as such. Doing so equips critical rhetoricians and democratic political activists with a resonant vocabulary that can be operationalized in the effort to speak back to powerful political and economic institutions' efforts to pass legislation that forbids the teaching of critical thinking in high school curricula, defunds public media that issues counterstatements to the consumer capitalistic and nationalistic ethos disseminated by corporatized media outlets, censors the public dissemination of images that reveal the horrors of war, curtails discussion of "alternative" relationship structures in public schools, and restricts citizen's access to classified information. Full disclosure of the human condition in all of its horror and beauty enables people to conceive of alternative possibilities to the circumstances they face in the isolated contexts of their own lives. Regimes of power that rigorously manage the range of experience or knowledge in the name of morality, security, or economic interest also manage the neural networks of citizens, which in turn manages potential threats to power that might come if affect was allowed to flow in unpredictable, unruly channels.

Butler addresses the institutional management of affect and its relation to political violence in her 2009 book *Frames of War*. She claims, "The critique of violence must begin with the question of the representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?" (2009: 51). The answer, she believes, is the media's tendency to only represent particular kinds of life as "grievable": the lives of those who are aligned with the dominant ideology of the society from which the media originates. The precariousness of the lives of other groups often passes without comment,

and as a result, we feel nothing about their suffering, and are therefore not motivated to take political action to alleviate it.

Butler writes that political violence “sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective response to others” (2009: 52). The solution, she argues, is to offer “interpretive matrices for the understanding of war that question and oppose the dominant interpretations—interpretations that not only act upon affect, but take form and become effective as affect itself” (2009: 52). More specifically, she prompts us develop interpretive frames that prompt people to recognize “we are bound to one another” in the precariousness of our lives (2009: 43).

This, Butler hopes, will lead to a new appreciation for the merits of “non-violence”—a refusal to reiterate the violent dynamics of social categorization through which we are formed as subjects. In her view, to act non-violently is “to assume responsibility for living a life that contests the determining power” of the violent relations that produces one subjectivity (Butler 2009: 170). Non-violence requires a self-conscious struggle against rage and aggression: “being mired in violence means that even as the struggle is thick, difficult, impeding, fitful, and necessary, it is not the same as determinism—being mired is the condition of possibility for the struggle for non-violence...” (Butler 2009: 171). Non-violence comes down to a conscious choice subjects must make about how to respond to violence that is directed against them. It is “the obligation of the disposed to decide whether to strike back and, if so, in what form...the non-reciprocated violent act does more to expose the unilateral brutality of the state than any other” (Butler 2009: 178). We should, in short, strive to act as pacifists and martyrs,

with the hope that the public avowal of our injurability will act rhetorically to compel others to identify with us, and to recognize that injurability is a “generalized condition” (Butler 2009: 178). Thus constituted as potential victims of violence, they will cease acting violently.

For the injunction of non-violence to make sense, there must be a change in mediated representations of the lives of Others so that we come to realize that *all* lives are precarious, and grievable, regardless of political or ideological affiliation: “non-violence is derived from the apprehension of equality in the midst of precariousness” (Butler 2009: 181). We should therefore “find and support those modes of appearance and representation” that offer access to the suffering of others (Butler 2009: 181). To those media and institutions that are inegalitarian in their representations of suffering, we should direct a “carefully crafted ‘fuck you’” (Butler 2009: 182). In other words, we need to practice rhetorical violence in order to secure the conditions from which we can begin to practice rhetoric of non-violence. This “aggression and rage” is permissible, Butler maintains, as long as “we” who are issuing the “fuck you” to power are not “discrete subjects calculating in relation to one another,” but rather, are a “shared precariousness,” a sort of disembodied collective affective force premised in mutual recognition of our interdependence (Butler 2009: 182).

Individual decision, Butler believes, “cannot finally be the ground for the struggle for non-violence. Decision fortifies the deciding ‘I,’ sometimes at the expense of relationality itself” (2009: 183). To decide to act is to reiterate the violence of differentiation that founded the illusion of subjective individuality. Nevertheless, something must be done by someone if we are to bring about the changes in media

practices necessary to enable people to collectively arrive at the conclusion that we are united by shared vulnerability, rather than divided by tribal affiliation. Who is going to initiate the process of change, if not discrete subjects calculating in relation to each other?

Butler makes the provocative claim that collective non-action is a form of revolutionary action. When confronted with injustice or injury, our best option, according to Butler, is to refuse to fight back against the aggressor; instead we should turn our attention towards demonstrating or revealing what has taken place. She cites approvingly Walter Benjamin's remark that "Perhaps revolutions are nothing other than human beings on the train of progress reaching for the emergency brakes" (Butler 2009: 184).

This might strike the reader as distressingly similar to William F. Buckley's declaration that a conservative is a "fellow who is standing athwart history yelling 'Stop!'" The key difference is that Buckley does not shy from intentional, even violent, intervention into political affairs in order to steer history towards a particular ideological trajectory. Conservatives may find much to like in Butler's theory of violence. Her faith in people's ability to break from their own histories of violence and subjugation, and to refuse to identify themselves according to the injuries that they perceive as having been done to them, accords with the principles of self-determination that form the bedrock of conservative thought, even if Butler would discourage the individualism that attends to these principles.

In *Frames of War*, Butler dips her toes in the primordial pools of affect that gather beneath the surface of conscious thought, but she quickly climbs back into the realm of semiosis to rehearse the claim that changes in representations will trigger a corresponding

cultural-wide change in the way people feel, and think about, violence. Her argument that limited media representations of violence create limited interpretive frames into which people fit affective intensities fails to address a major problem: a lifetime of exposure to limited frames constitutes patterns in neural circuitry that limit people's receptivity to jarring new ideas. Because these frames are wired into the brain, shocking images of American war atrocities that contradict the prevailing nationalistic ethos will not easily dislodge them. More likely, the brain will explain away contradictions by rationalizing the violence it encounters according to pre-established ideological narratives.

Networks of political power, networks of media representations, and synaptic networks of neural communication are contiguous entities, joined together by currents of affective energy that passes through and between people and institutions, tying them together in increasingly tight formations of uncritical consensus and unified purpose. The brain-body-culture network established in most adults does not come undone if it is exposed to new information about the state of the world as easily as Butler presumes. Bruce Wexler explains that by early adulthood, the neuroplasticity of the brain is greatly reduced, and this leads to a fundamental shift in the relationship between the individual and the environment. During the first part of life, the brain and mind shape themselves to the major recurring features of their environment; by early adulthood, the individual attempts to make the environment conform to the established internal structures of the brain and mind. The adult brain is more apt to fit new information into time-tested interpretive frames, embedded in neural networks, in order to reduce contradiction and thereby maintain homeostatic equilibrium. The gradual reduction in our brain's plasticity as we age alters our "perception of the external world according to preexisting

structures,” which consequently leads us to attempt to alter “the course of events in the external...interpersonal world in such a way as to increase the likelihood that subsequent events will be consistent with the preexisting internal structures” (Wexler 143).

If we want to increase people’s sensitivity to violence and empathy for those who suffer, we need to articulate violence with negative affects in developing brains, at every step in the process of socialization, especially in the arenas of education and entertainment. This is, by most definitions of the term, a violent act—it is the willful administration of emotional distress to vulnerable people, for the purposes of shaping identity and attitude in a way that coheres with a particular ideological vision. The alternative, however, is to gamble that people will be moved by non-violent poststructuralist philosophical entreaties to turn away from thrillingly violent spectacles that offer the mindless euphoria of self-certainty and tribal belonging. Everything we know about history, neuroscience, and politics suggests that this is not a wise gamble to make.

When violence happens, it is often assumed to be the result of bad judgments made by faulty minds, but rarely is the question of how minds are constituted rhetorically treated with the patience and complexity of thought it requires, perhaps because we have not sufficiently accounted for the question of what constitutes rhetoric. A critical neurorhetorical approach allows us to frame symbolic violence as a material, potentially traumatic force that can operate simultaneously on the planes of attribution (the introduction of ways of thinking) and deprivation (the denial of alternative modes of thinking). This insight increases sensitivity to abuses of institutional power that might otherwise escape commentary because they do not produce a visible sign, and they elude

the critical frames we currently use to interrogate violence.

## CHAPTER 7

### OUTLINE FOR A CRITICAL NEURORHETORIC

Given a contemporary cultural, social, and political scene that is saturated with words and images designed specifically to deliver an affective punch rather than a persuasive rational argument, I became interested in learning more about the vectors of human being that respond to, and are responsible for, these entreaties. Some element in the pre-linguistic corporeal body seemed to be involved, but the vast majority of the rhetorical theory and critical commentary I encountered insisted that people were being persuaded to make bad *mental* calculations based on the faulty linguistic frames, given to them by powerful institutions, through which they interpreted their lived experience. When I sought out studies in the humanities that would give me insight into where, and how, exactly, these linguistic frames establish residency in the body, I found that “although there has been a tremendous outpouring of scholarship on ‘the body’ in the last twenty years, nearly all of the work in this area has been confined to the analysis of discourses about the body” (Alaimo and Hekman 3). This work, in my estimation, foreclosed attention to the physiological processes of the body’s interior that produce affect and predispose thought to move in particular trajectories.

Rhetoricians consistently declare that bodies and emotions are “socially constructed” in discourse, and therefore could be, presumably, reconstructed through rhetoric that builds new, and better, discursive frames of interpretation. Yet both my personal experience and my observations of public affairs indicated to me that virtually all people are capable of intellectually holding one set of ideas about ethics and politics

while acting on contradictory impulses that seemed rooted in something below, or outside of, consciousness. This is the phenomenon Gorgias sought to explain in his *Encomium of Helen*. For Gorgias, “language causes real changes in the material world—to bodies, selves, objects, and situations” (Rivers and Tirrell 46). I was struck by the fact that Gorgias did not stipulate a hierarchy of influence by which transformations in situations produce changes in bodies, or vice versa. Instead, he suggested that the corporeal and the ideational were different parts of a single circuit composed of the body, the word, and the world. If we dismantle this circuit and isolate just one of these parts for the purpose of making claims about the nature of human events, we are left with a limited interpretive apparatus through which to perceive and evaluate those events.

In order to widen the scope of critical rhetorical theory, I went in search of critical perspectives that existed outside of the mainstream of rhetorical scholarship, and found valuable and underexploited resources in the fields of contemporary neuroscience and affect theory. Some rhetoricians argue that the insights offered by these fields of study cannot be allowed within the rhetorical tradition because they are not within the rhetorical tradition. In this dissertation, I have attempted fight against this tautological argument from two directions. First, I maintain that disciplinary prejudice is counterproductive to the growth of critical rhetorical studies, because the relevance of critical rhetoric as a means to bring about social change is directly correlated to its capacity to respond to, and transform, a socio-political field that is perpetually in a state of flux. Like the apocryphal shark that must keep swimming or die, critical rhetorical studies must move in concert with the culture, both in terms of the subjects it takes as legitimate sites of critical inquiry, and in the analytical resources it draws upon to

theorize practical interventions. Second, I submit that if we listen more carefully, we find that recent neuroscience echoes many of the claims that rhetoricians in the Sophistic and mystic traditions made thousands of years ago: namely, that symbolic activity is physically and physiologically transformative, and the material transformations wrought by rhetoric have implications for subjects' capacity to engage in critical thought and agential judgment. Neuroscientific research offers specific information about physiological operations that can help rhetoricians produce new tactics and strategies to counteract rhetorical practices that target the pre-conscious body. In addition, the language of neuroscience can be a useful tool in critical efforts because of the prestige it carries, for better or worse, in the minds of many citizens. We can either attempt to systematically delegitimize scientific discourse in the public sphere, or tactically deploy it for political purposes. It is my contention that the latter option is preferable, if our goals are to promote social change. Alternatively, we can strive to defend a construction called "the rhetorical tradition" as a matter of Idealistic principle, but if we choose to do so, we should be aware that the rhetorical tradition neither begins with Aristotle, nor ends with Kenneth Burke.

If this dissertation is successful, it will have convinced the reader that a critical neurorhetoric can supplement contemporary cultural and rhetorical theory by grounding studies of the representational body in a critical vocabulary that lets us talk about what those representations do to corporeal bodies once they pass through the sensory organs of the body's exterior. Pruchnic observes that from the perspective of science, the "[P]rimary forms of persuasion and motivation are seen to emerge from neurological chemistry," yet within rhetorical studies, "our traditional access and possible resistance to

such forces seem restricted to a meta-level of analysis” (2008a: 172). The body’s interior is uncharted territory for rhetoricians. Critical neuro rhetoric provides navigational tools. We needn’t abandon the concepts that have oriented the discipline for the last several decades; we only need to update them so that we may keep up with “changes in technoscientific and economic production,” such of as those channeled through the internet, that have made way for “the appearance of new flows of power focusing more specifically on affective capacities and the internal neurology of human bodies to produce discrete capacities rather than generic identities” (Pruchnic 2008a: 196).

Critical rhetoricians should not engage neuroscience because neurocriticism is suddenly *au courant* in the humanities; rather, this engagement is important and necessary because the nature of constitutive experience has changed. In any given era, new technologies, new persuasive techniques, new forms of social organization, and new centers of power demand new rhetorical strategies of intervention. In our era, the culture is becoming increasingly individualized. Economic and political institutions routinely encourage Americans to identify not with broad social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, or political affiliation, but rather, with niche’ groups that represent seemingly idiosyncratic clusters of desire and anxiety. Marketers draw from vast amounts of data to craft rhetoric that speaks directly to consumer’s individual habits of consumption; political campaigns no longer rely on sweeping oratory addressed to the nation, but instead use personalized emails and web-based advertisements that are designed to foster identifications with individuals who fall within the parameters of narrow demographic categories. Rhetorical theories that track social changes according to macropolitical

structures are bound to miss the micropolitical techniques of persuasion that are increasingly ubiquitous in both the private and public realms.

Critical neuroretoric is uniquely situated to attend to micropolitical rhetorical practices, as it takes as its object of study the individual brain and body and examines these things in relation to institutional power, without arguing for the hierarchal importance of one over the other. Instead, critical neuroretoric seeks to understand the working of power and ideology through a circuitous network of influence that encompasses the distributions of material and symbolic resources, the rhetorical activities that legitimize or call into question patterns of distribution, and the neurophysiological dynamics which either promote or inhibit a subject's capacity to recognize the ideological structures that constitute him, and to conceive of personal and cultural practices that could establish alternative ways of being.

The following principles could form the foundations of a critical neuroretoric that is attuned to the Sophistic and Burkean rhetorical tradition, informed by—and genially exploitive of—insights generated by neuroscience, and responsive to the unique cultural and social problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

1. The body is always already a symbolic entity that moves, and is moved by, social experience, but the nature of that symbolicity is not always or necessarily *linguistic*. The brain checks the body's perceptions against internal representations of that world, and makes available to consciousness a synthesis of the two. Language is one of the screens through which sensory data passes en route to being rendered cognitively meaningful, but it is neither the only one, nor is it, in all cases, the one most influential one.

2. Repetition of thought breeds belief, but “belief” is not merely an attitude or orientation captured in language, it is also a physiological structure inscribed on the brain. The brain’s internal map, materially manifested in neural pathways, becomes strengthened each time its expectations of the world are confirmed by experience, whether that entails the existence of an arm or the character of a certain social group. Eventually these representations become self-sustaining, so that deviations from expectation are easily dismissed as anomalous, or even seemingly inconceivable.
3. While interpretive habits become increasingly intransigent when they are rehearsed over time, they are very rarely permanent. Rhetoric has the power to induce the plastic brain to reorganize its physiological structures, and these material changes have epistemological and political consequences as the thinking subject is called upon to make sense of his or her phenomenological experience. However, we can almost always talk our way out of that which we’ve been talked into. Because brains are neither inert *tabula rasas*, nor inevitable products of genetic pre-determinants, there is hope for renewal. Critical rhetoric can be a healing practice, but as with all such practices, it must evolve in step with the pathologies it seeks to address.

Critical neurorhetoric emphasizes that a pre-subjective force “always already *constitutes* the ontological grounding for the very operations of any theory or critical act of response and, as a result, directly impacts how we do theory and criticism” (Abel 2008).

Traditional rhetorical criticism often summons affect as a means to diagnose what contextual factors caused an emotional reaction in people. Neurorhetorical criticism

would draw attention to the ways in which the neurological constitution of subjects produces the contexts that in turn produce certain trajectories for emotional response. When examining a social conflict, a critical neurorhetorician would be as interested in the confluence of socio-biological factors that generate discursive outcomes, as he or she would be in the discursive texts or performances that appear on the scene as a result of those factors. Critical neurorhetoric *does not take people at their word*; it instead speculates as to why people arrive at the words they offer to themselves and others, and draws liberally from scientific knowledge to develop compelling explanatory theories and critical interventions.

We could also envision practical application of critical neurorhetoric in rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Composition instructors routinely require students to analyze cultural texts such as advertisements, television shows, and films in order to identify the ideological arguments “concealed” within discourse and imagery. This pedagogical practice is driven by the hope that students might “change their minds” about the cultural products they enjoy and consume once they become aware of the social ills that these products spread throughout the body politic. The engine of this practice is the drive towards self-reflexivity: students are asked to step outside of their enjoyment of a text and reflect upon that text’s meaning from a critical distance. If we take seriously the ideas I’ve outlined in this dissertation—that rhetoric is addictive to the brain, that our brain-bodies think for themselves, and that the trauma of immersion in mediated violence flattens out our natural capacity to identify with the suffering of others—we may come to the conclusion that the pedagogical exercise of textual criticism may not be the most effective way to reconstitute students as critical agents. We can never fully step outside

of ourselves and our affective attachments, as that which one steps out of “consists of the *same* affective force field as that which one steps into at the moment of reflexivity: any self-reflexivity is itself affected by the affective forces giving rise to the reflecting ‘self’” (Abel 2008; emphasis in original). As currently practiced in rhetoric and composition classrooms, critical analyses of cultural texts too often implicitly prompt students to demonstrate that they have learned to “think critically” about cultural texts and events that they previously—that is, prior to reading critical essays assigned in class—approached with unfettered affective desire. But we must ask: with what part of their brains and bodies are students “thinking critically”? If composition teachers unquestioningly align critical thinking with self-reflexive cognition, then critical thinking of this sort is insufficient as a means of transforming students’ affective attachments to ideas and objects. At best, students may hold their affective impulses at bay long enough to type a term paper that denies those impulses in the name of abstract intellectual principles.

A critical neuroretorical pedagogy would ask students to read their own bodies as texts that represent power relations through the language of affect.<sup>39</sup> Instead of asking what words or images mean to them, students would strive to suspend judgment, and question what images *do* to them: what visceral reactions do the symbols trigger, before cognition imposes a narrative structure or moral imperative? Why are particular affects articulated to particular symbols, and what are the cultural and social forces that established this link? How do the affective intensities that some students report differ

---

<sup>39</sup> Abel (2007) uses the term “masocriticism” to describe the process of intentionally suspending recourse to history and context in encounters with texts. My thoughts concerning the potential pedagogical application of neuroretorical principles are indebted to Abel’s application of masocriticism to literary texts.

from those expressed in other students, and what are the implications of these differences in terms of hindering or facilitating cross-cultural cooperation? Posing these sorts of questions may provide a way for students to analyze the ways in which social experience has constituted them as corporeal subjects, and offer a point of entry into a discussion of how we might go about re-constituting ourselves through practices which wed the somatic and intellectual registers of being. Rather than resignifying a text's or event's meaning through the application of a borrowed theoretical paradigm, we might allow these things to do their work to us—make us suffer, or exult, or feel rage or pity—and only afterwards reflect upon the ways in which the circulation of affects delivered through texts binds us together in social formations that are defined by shared structures of feelings rather than by symbolic identifications. We might begin to question whether, for instance, our social allegiances are to symbolic constructions such as a nation, a city, or an institution, or to patterns of affect given form in emotions such as anger, empathy, or love. Disarticulating affect and emotion from the symbolic structures to which they've been linked through habitual practices could, perhaps, open the door to new articulations, and the formation of new social affiliations.

If widely adopted in college writing classrooms, critical neuroretorical pedagogy may have significant implications for the health of American democracy. Young people often abandon the socially challenging ideas they acquire in college once they are faced with the demands of a “real world” characterized by incessant pressure to labor and consume; these ideas can quickly come to be viewed retrospectively as unrealistic and impractical, applicable to term papers but not to everyday life. However, a critical practice that is premised on a radical distrust of one's own automatic visceral

compulsions and mental orientations, and one that is habitually performed rather than intellectually professed, has the potential to establish roots in the central nervous systems of those who undergo such training, and therefore outlast the college years and continue to exert influence as students transition into becoming responsible democratic citizens.

The discipline of rhetoric was created in ancient Greece to equip citizens with the communicative skills necessary to meet the challenges of democracy. Originally, rhetorical studies sought to empower the privileged few with the ability to persuade others to identify with their ways of thinking. As we consider the direction the field is to take in the future, it is my contention that we should seek to formulate a rhetoric that discourages both scholars and citizens from too easily identifying with their own deeply embodied habits of thought and feeling. Critical rhetoricians must be able to develop timely new approaches—a daunting enough task—without the added burden of unproductive territorial disputes at the disciplinary borders.<sup>40</sup> Rhetorical scholars are, at least in theory, uniquely trained to challenge the stability of borders, and to redraw them as the exigencies of the rhetorical situation change. It is my hope that this dissertation speaks to the dynamism of critical rhetoric, and challenges the notion that “tradition” is synonymous with “preservation.”

---

<sup>40</sup> Let me make clear that I recognize the value of *productive* disputes within the discipline. In the dissertation, I will develop more fully the distinction, as I understand it, between productive and unproductive criticism. For now, I will roughly characterize it as the difference between arguments that ask *what works*, and those that merely argue for what *should* or *should not* be, often with recourse to claims about what has or has not been.

## WORKS CITED

- Abel, Marco. "Judgment is Not an Exit: Toward an Affective Criticism of Violence with *American Psycho*." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6.3 (2001): 137-154. Print.
- . *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique After Representation*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. Print.
- Ackerman, Diane. *An Alchemy of Mind: The Marvel and Mystery of the Brain*. New York: Scribner, 2004. Print.
- Agrippa, Heinrich Cornelius. "Three Books of Occult Philosophy." Trans. "J.F." Ed. Joseph H. Peterson. Twilit Grotto: Esoteric Archives. CD-ROM. Joseph H. Peterson, 2003.
- Ahmed, Sarah. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004. Print.
- Anderson, Ben. "Becoming and being hopeful: towards a theory of affect." *Environment and Planning Development: Society and Space* 24.5 (2006): 733-752. Print.
- . "Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of 'Total War.'" *The Affect Theory Reader*. Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 161-185. Print.
- Anderson, Dana. "Questioning the Motives of Habituated Action: Burke and Bourdieu on Practice." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37.3 (2004): 255-274. Print.
- Aristotle. On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Trans. George Alexander Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.
- Arthos, Wayne. "Locating the Instability of Topic Places: Rhetoric, Phronesis, and Neurobiology." *Communication Quarterly* 48.2 (2000): 272-292. Print.
- Aune, James. *Rhetoric and Marxism*. Boulder: Westview, 1994. Print.
- . "The Scholastic Fallacy: Habitus, and Symbolic Violence: Pierre Bourdieu and the Prospects of Ideology Criticism." *Western Journal of Communication* 75.4 (2011): 429-433. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics." *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*. Eds. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 49-84. Print.
- . "Unfeeling Kerry." *Theory and Event* 8.2 (2005). Web.

- Bertelsen, Lone and Andrew Murphie. "An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Felix Guattari on Affect and Refrain." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 138-157. Print.
- Black, Edwin. *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978. Print.
- Blackman, Lisa. "Affect, Relationality and the Problem of 'Personality.'" *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25.1 (2008): 27-51. Print.
- Blair, Carole. "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality." *Rhetorical Bodies*. Eds. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. 16-57. Print.
- Boucher, Geoffrey. "The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler." *Parrhesia* 1 (2006): 112-141. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977. Print.
- . *The Logic of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990. Print.
- . *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. Print.
- . *Practical Reason*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998a. Print.
- . *Masculine Domination*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998b. Print.
- Brennan, Theresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca, Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method." *The Hudson Review* 4.2 (1951): 165-203. Print.
- . *Counter-Statement*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968. Print.
- . *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969(a). Print.
- . *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969(b). Print.
- . *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970. Print.
- . *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. Print.

- . "(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action." *Critical Inquiry* 4.4 (1978): 809-838. Print.
- . *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984(a). Print.
- . *Attitudes Toward History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 (b). Print.
- . *On Human Nature: A Gathering While Everything Flows*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- . "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. 270-282. Print.
- . *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* London and New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- . "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All." *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 6-26. Print.
- . *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- . *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Brooklyn: Verso, 2009. Print.
- Butterworth, Michael L. "'Katie was Not Only a Girl, She was Terrible': Katie Hnida, Body Rhetoric, and Football at the University of Colorado." *Communication Studies* 59.3 (2008): 259-273. Print.
- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. "'Agency: Promiscuous and Protean.'" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005): 7. Print.
- Carelton, Walter. "On Rhetorical Knowing." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71.2 (1985): 227-237. Print.
- Carty, Daniel. "Poll: Most Americans Feel Rhetoric, Tucson Shooting Unrelated." Cbsnews.com. 11 January 2011. Web. 9 September 2012.
- Charland, Maurice. "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Quebecois*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73.2 (1987): 133-150. Print.
- . "Rehabilitating Rhetoric: Confronting Blindspots in Discourse and Social Theory." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*. Eds. John Lucaites, Celeste Condit, and Sally Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999. 464-474. Print.

- Chow, Rey. "The Elusive Material: What the Dog Doesn't Understand." *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 221-233. Print.
- Clark, Andy. *Natural Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Cloud, Dana. "The Affirmative Masquerade." *American Communication Journal* 4.3 (Spring 2001). Web.
- . "The Matrix and Critical Theory's Desertion of the Real." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. 3.4 (2006): 329-354. Print.
- Clough, Patricia. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. Print.
- Colebrook, Claire. "On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential." *Material Feminisms*. Eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008. 52-84. Print.
- Coles, Romand. "The neuropolitical *habitus* of resonant receptive democracy." *Ethics and Global Politics* 4.4 (2011): 273-293. Print.
- Condit, Celeste. "The Materiality of Coding: Rhetoric, Genetics, and the Matter of Life." *Rhetorical Bodies*. Ed. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. 326-356. Print.
- . "Culture and Biology in Human Communication: Toward a Multi-Causal Model." *Communication Education* 49.1 (2000): 7-24. Print
- . "Contemporary Rhetorical Criticism: Diverse Bodies Learning New Languages." *Rhetoric Review: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Rhetorical Criticism*. 25.6 (2004): 357-386. Print.
- . *Pathos, for Us*. Unpublished manuscript. *Condit's Attic*. 14 January 2012. Web. 2 August 2012.
- . "Action! How Emotions Move the Body." *The Pathos Workshop*. Pathosworkshop.com. 2 April 2012. Web. 15 August 2012.
- Connolly, William. *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Print.
- . "Materialities of Experience." *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 178-200. Print.

- Coole, Diana. "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh." *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 92-115. Print.
- Cooper, Marilyn M. "Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted." *CCC* 62.3 (2011): 420-449. Print.
- Covino, William. "Magic and/as Rhetoric: Outlines of a History of Phantasy." *JAC* 12.2 (1992). Web.
- . *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy: An Eccentric History of the Composing Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. Print.
- Crabbe, Bryan. "Symbolizing Motion: Burke's Dialectic and Rhetoric of the Body." *Rhetoric Review* 22.2 (2003): 121-137. Print.
- Crowley, Sharon. "Reflections on an Argument That Won't Go Away: Or, a Turn of the Ideological Screw." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78.4 (1992): 450-65. Print.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.
- . *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt, Brace 2000. Print.
- Davis, Diane. *Breaking Up (at) Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*. Carbondale: University of Southern Press, 2000. Print.
- . "Identification: Burke and Freud On Who You Are." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38.2 (2008): 123-145. Print.
- . *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. Print.
- de Certeau, Michael. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Rhetoric of Drugs: An Interview." *Differences* 5.1 (1993): 1-25.
- Doidge, Norman. *The Brain that Changes Itself*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Dolnick, Sam and Timothy Williams. "Talk Radio Hosts Reject Blame in Shooting." *New York Times*. 10 January 2011. Web. 2 September 2012.
- Doxtader, Erik. "Contending with Violent Words; or, The Afterthought of (In)Civility." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44.4 (2011): 403-423. Print.

- Eagleman, David. "Interview with David Eagleman." *The Colbert Report*. Comedy Central. 21 July 2011. Television.
- Edbauer, Jenny. "Executive Overspill: Affective Bodies, Intensity, and Bush-in-Relation." *PMC* 15.1 (2004). Web.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Engnell, Richard A. "Materiality, Symbolicity, and the Rhetoric of Order: Dialectical Biologism as Motive in Burke." *Western Journal of Communication* 62.1 (1998): 1-25. Print.
- Fahnestock, Jeanne. "Rhetoric in the Age of Cognitive Science." *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*. Ed. Richard Graff. New York: State University of New York Press, 2005. 159-180. Print.
- Flor, Herta. "Phantom-limb pain: characteristics, causes, and treatment." *The Lancet Neurology* 1 (2002): 182-189. Print.
- Ford, Andrew. *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002. Print.
- Ford, Leigh Arden. "Fetching good out of evil in AA: A Bormannean fantasy theme analysis of *The Big Book of alcoholics anonymous*." *Communication Quarterly* 37.1 (1989): 1-15. Print.
- Foss, Sonja K., and Cindy L. Griffin. "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric." *Communication Monographs* 62 (March 1995), 2-18. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality. Volume 3*. New York: Random House, 1986. Print.
- Frank, Adam. "Some Avenues of Feeling." *Criticism* 46.3 (2004): 511-524. Print.
- Fraser, Mariam, Sarah Kember, and Celia Lury. "Inventive Life: Approaches to the New Vitalism." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 22.1 (2005): 1-14. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1950. Print.
- Gencarella, Stephen Olbrys. "Purifying Rhetoric: Empedocles and the Myth of Rhetorical Theory." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96.3 (2010): 231-256. Print.
- Genosko, Gary. "The Life and Work of Felix Guattari: From Transversality to Ecosophy." *The Three Ecologies*. Trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London: Athlone, 2000. 106-159. Print.

- Gibbs, Anna. "After Affect: Sympathy, Synchronicity, and Mimetic Communication." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 186-206. Print.
- Gorgias. "Encomium of Helen." *The Greek Sophists*. Trans. John Dillion and Tania Gergel. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Greene, Ronald Walter. "Another Materialist Rhetoric." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998): 21-41. Print.
- Greenfield, Susan. *The Private Life of the Brain*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999. Print.
- Gregg, Melissa and Gregory J. Seigworth. "An Inventory of Shimmers." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 1-25. Print.
- Gregg, Richard. *Symbolic Inducement and Knowing: A Study in the Foundations of Rhetoric*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984. Print.
- Gross, Daniel M. *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Print.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 309-338. Print.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Grusin, Richard. *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Guattari, Felix. *The Guattari Reader*. Ed. Gary Genosko. London: Blackwell, 1996. Print.
- Gunn, Joshua. "The Rhetoric of Exorcism: George W. Bush and the Return of Political Demonology." *Western Journal of Communication* 68.1 (2004): 1-23. Print.
- . "A Vow to be Faithfully Ironic: Materialism and the Magical Rhetoric of Feet." *The American Communication Journal* 7 (2004). Web.
- . "Zombie Trouble: A Propaedeutic on Ideological Subjectification and the Unconscious." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91.2 (2005): 144-174. Print.
- . "For Love of Rhetoric, with Continual Reference to Kenny and Dolly." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94.2 (2008): 131-155. Print.

- Hansen, Mark. "The Time of Affect, or Bearing Witness to Life." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 584-626. Print.
- Hariman, Robert. "Critical Rhetoric and Postmodern Theory." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77.1 (1991): 67-70. Print.
- Hariman, Robert and John Lucaites. "Dissent and Emotional Management in a Liberal-Democratic Society: The Kent State Iconic Photograph." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31.3 (2001): 4-31. Print.
- Harold, Christine and Kevin Michael DeLuca. "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.2 (2005): 263-286. Print.
- Hauser, Gerald A. "Incongruous Bodies: Arguments for Personal Sufficiency and Public Insufficiency." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36.1 (1999): 1-8. Print.
- Hawhee, Deborah. "Burke on Drugs." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34.11 (2004): 5-28. Print.
- . *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Print.
- . *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. Print.
- Hawk, Byron. *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. Print.
- Hemming, Clare. "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn." *Cultural Studies* 19.5 (2005): 548-67. Print.
- Hill, A. "Phantom limb pain: a review of the literature on attributes and potential." *Journal of Pain Symptom Management* 17.2 (1999): 125-142. Print.
- Hoy, David Couzens. "Critical Resistance: Foucault and Bourdieu." *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*. Eds. Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber. New York: Routledge, 1999. 3-22. Print.
- Hunter, Lynette. "Considering Issues of Rhetoric and Violence." *Parallex* 6.2 (2000): 2-8. Print.
- Iacoboni, Marco. *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008. Print.
- Ivie, Robert L. "Productive Criticism Then and Now." *American Journal of Communication* 4 (2001). Web.

- . "Book Review of the *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke as the Edge of Language*." *The Communication Review* 14.1 (2011): 68-71. Print.
- Jack, Jordynn. "This is Your Brain on Rhetoric: Empathy and Reason in Neuroscience Studies." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40.5 (2010): 411-437. Print.
- . "'The Piety of Degradation': Kenneth Burke, the Bureau of Social Hygiene, and Permanence and Change." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90.4 (2004): 446-468. Print.
- Jarratt, Susan. "A Matter of Emphasis." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36.2 (2006): 213-19. Print.
- Jensen, George H. *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2000. Print.
- Jha, Alok. "Where Beliefs are Born." *The Guardian*. 30 June 2005. Web. 16 September 2012.
- Johnstone Jr., Henry W. "The Philosophical Basis of Rhetoric." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40.1 (2007): 15-26. Print.
- Jordan, John W. "The Rhetorical Limits of the Plastic Body." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 90.3 (2004). 327-358. Print.
- Junk, Moon Kie. "Symbolic and Physical Violence: Legitimate State Coercion of Filipino Workers in Prewar Hawai'i." *American Studies* 45.3 (2004): 107-137. Print.
- Kennedy, George. "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25.1 (1992): 1-21. Print.
- . *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. Print.
- Kennerly, Michele. "Getting Carried Away: How Rhetorical Transport Gets Judgment Going." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40.3 (2010): 269-291. Print.
- Kinneavy, James L. "*Kairos*: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric." *Rhetoric and Praxis*. Ed. Jean Dietz Moss. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986. 79-105. Print.
- Kirby, John T. "The 'Great Triangle' in Early Greek Rhetoric and Poetics." *Landmark Essays on Classical Greek Rhetoric*. Ed. Edward Shiappa. Davis, CA: Hermagoras, 1994. 3-16. Print.

- Koener, Brendan I. "Secret of AA: After 75 Years, We Don't Know How It Works." *Wired.com*: July 2010. Web. 5 August 2012.
- Kuypers, Jim. "Must We All Be Political Activists?" *American Communication Journal* 4.1 (2000). Web.
- Lakoff, George. *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century Politics With an 18th-Century Brain*. New York: Viking, 2008. Print.
- Lash, Scott. "Life (Vitalism)." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23.2 (2006): 323-349. Print.
- Lakoff, George and Steven Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic, 1999. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. "How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies." *Body and Society* 10.2 (2004): 205-230. Print.
- LeDoux, Joseph. *The Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*. New York: Viking, 2002. Print.
- . *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinning of Emotional Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008. Print.
- Leff, Michael. "The Habitation of Rhetoric." *Argument and Critical Practice: Proceedings of the Fifth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation*. Ed. Joseph Wenzel. Annandale, VA: SCA. 1987. 1-9. Print.
- Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007. Print.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *Criticism and Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. Print.
- Lovell, Terry. "Thinking Feminism With and Against Bourdieu." *Feminist Theory* 1.1 (2000): 11-32. Print.
- Lozano-Reich, Nina M. and Dana Cloud. "The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality." *Western Journal of Communication* 73.2 (2009): 220-226. Print.
- Lundberg, Christian and Joshua Gunn. "Ouija Board, Are There Any Communications? Agency, Ontotheology, and the Death of the Humanist Subject, or, Continuing the ARS Conversation." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35.4 (2005): 83-105. Print.
- Malabou, Catherine. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print.

- . *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. Print.
- Massumi, Brian. "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements." *A Thousand Plateaus*. By Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Print.
- . "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique* 30 (1995). 83-109. Print.
- . *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. Print.
- Mays, Chris and Julie Jung. "Priming Terministic Inquiry: Toward a Methodology of Neurorhetoric." *Rhetoric Review* 31:1 (2012): 41-59. Print.
- McComiskey, Bruce. "Neo-Sophistic Rhetorical Theory: Sophistic Precedents for Contemporary Epistemic Rhetoric." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 24.3/4 (1994): 16-24. Print.
- McDermott, Rose. "Cognitive Neuroscience and Politics: Next Steps." *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking*. Ed. W. Russell Neuman, George E. Marcus, Ann N. Crigler, and Michael MacKuen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 375-398. Print.
- McGee, Michael Calvin. "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric." *Explorations in Rhetoric: Studies in Honor of Douglas Ehninger*. Ed. Ray E. McKerrow. Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, 1982. 23-48. Print.
- . "Text, Context, and Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54.3 (1990): 274-289. Print.
- McKerrow, Ray E. "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis." *Communication Monographs* 6.2 (1989): 91-111. Print.
- . "Corporeality and Cultural Rhetoric: A Site for Rhetoric's Future." *The Southern Communication Journal* 63 (1998): 315-328. Print.
- . "Critical Rhetoric and the Possibility of the Subject." *The Critical Turn: Rhetoric and Philosophy in Postmodern Discourse*. Ed Ian Angus and Lenore Langsdorf. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993: 51-67. Print.
- Mercieca, Jennifer. "On Political Rhetoric and Violence." *Encyclopedia Britannica Blog*, 2011. 6 January 2011. Web. 11 September 2012.

- Merzenich, Michael. "Neural Representations, Experience, and Change." *Mind Brain Continuum*. Eds. Rodolfo Llinas and Patricia Churchland. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996. 61-81. Print.
- Miles, Chris. "Occult Retraction: Cornelius Agrippa and the Paradox of Magical language." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38.4 (2008): 433-456. Print.
- Miller, Carolyn. "What Can Automation Tell Us About Agency?" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37 (2007): 137-157. Print.
- Miller, Daniel A., Tracey Cronin, Amber L. Garcia, and Nyla R. Branscombe. "The Relative Impact of Anger and Efficacy on Collective Action in Affected Feelings of Fear." *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 12 (2009): 445-462. Print.
- Mooney, Chris. "Inside the Political Brain." *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2012). Web.
- Murray, Joddy. *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. Print.
- O'Connor, Erin. *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. Print.
- Olbrys, Stephen Gencarella. "Disciplining the Carnavalesque: Chris Farley's Exotic Dance." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3.3 (2006): 240-259. Print.
- Ono, Kent and John Sloop. "Commitment to Telos: A Sustained Critical Rhetoric." *Communication Monographs* 59.1 (1992): 48-60. Print.
- O'Reilly, Bill. "Murder in Arizona and the Gross Exploitation of It." *Foxnews.com*. 10 January 2011. Web. 13 September 2012.
- Palin, Sarah. "America's Enduring Strength." Youtube.com. 12 January 2011. Web. 13 September 2012.
- Papoulias, Constantina and Felicity Callard. "Biology's Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect." *Body and Society* 16.1 (2010): 29-56. Print.
- Patterson, Randi and Gail Corning. "Researching the Body: An Annotated Bibliography for Rhetoric." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 27.3 (1997): 5-29. Print.
- Pavlich, Katie. "On Loughner: Liberals Wrong Once Again." Townhall.com. 25 May 2011. Web. 13 September 2012.
- Plato. *Phaedrus*. Ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Trans. Harold North Fowler. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001. Print.

- Pruchnic, Jeff. "Rhetoric, Cybernetics, and the Work of the Body in Burke's Body of Work." *Rhetoric Review* 25.3 (2006): 275-96. Print.
- . "Neurorhetorics: Cybernetics, Psychotropics, and the Materiality of Persuasion." *Configurations* 16.2 (2008a): 167-197. Print.
- . "The Invisible Gland: Affect and Political Economy." *Criticism* 50.1 (2008b): 160-175. Print.
- Pruchnic, Jeff and Kim Lacey. "The Future of Forgetting: Rhetoric, Memory, Affect." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41.4 (2011): 1-23. Print.
- Ramachandran, V.S. "Mirror Neurons and the Brain in a Vat." *Edge: The Third Culture*. 10 (2006). Web.
- . *The Tell-Tale Brain*. New York: Norton, 2011.
- Ramachandran, V.S. and Sandra Blakeslee. *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999. Print.
- Rand, Erin J. "Thinking Violence and Rhetoric." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 12.3 (2009): 461-484. Print.
- Rice, Jenny Edbauer. "The New 'New': Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94.2 (2008): 200-212. Print.
- Rickert, Thomas. *Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Zizek, and the Return of the Subject*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2007. Print.
- Rivers, Nathaniel and Jeremy Tirrell. "Productive Strife: Andy Clark's Cognitive Science and Rhetorical Agnomism." *Janus Head* 12.1 (2011): 39-59. Print.
- Ronell, Avital. *Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Print.
- Salih, Sara. *Judith Butler: Essential Guides for Literary Study*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Schabel, Jim. "Rethinking Rehab." *Nature* 458 (2009): 25-27. Print.
- Schwarz, Jeffrey and Sharon Begley. *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force*. New York: Regan Books, 2002. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky and Adam Frank. "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. 93-121. Print.

- Selzer, Jack. "Habeas Corpus: An Introduction." *Rhetorical Bodies*. Eds. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. 1-15. Print.
- Shouse, Eric. "Feeling, Emotion, Affect." *M/C Journal*. 8.6 (2005). Web.
- Linda J. Skitka, Christopher W. Bauman, Nicholas P. Aramovich, and G. Scott Morgan. "Confrontational and Preventative Policy Responses to Terrorism: Anger Wants a Fight and Fear Wants 'Them' to Go Away." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28 (2006): 375-384. Print.
- Slingerland, Edward. *What Science Offers the Humanities: Integrating Body and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth and the Human*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Spinoza, Baruch. *The Ethics and Selected Letters*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982. Print.
- Tallis, Raymond. "The neuroscience delusion." *Times Literary Supplement*. 9 April 2008. Web. 12 June 2012.
- Thames, Richard. "Nature's Physician: The Metabiology of Kenneth Burke." *Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century*. Ed. Bernard L. Brock. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. 19-34. Print.
- Theweleit, Klaus. *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Print.
- Thiele, Leslie. *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Judgment, Neuroscience, and Narrative*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Thrift, Nigel. "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect." *Geografiska Annaler* 86.1 (2004): 57-78. Print.
- . *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Tomkins, Silvan. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*. Vol 4. New York: Springer, 1992. Print.
- Vahanian, Noelle. "A Conversation with Catherine Malabou." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9.1 (2008): 1-13. Print.
- Vaillant, George. "Alcoholic's Anonymous: Cure or Cult?" *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* (2005) 39: 431-436. Print.

- Venus, Wesley. "Review of A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity." *Kairo.technorhetoric.net*. Web. 2 October 2012.
- Walker, Jeffrey. "Of Brains and Rhetoric." *College English* 52.3 (1990): 301-22. Print.
- Wander, Philip. "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory." *Communication Studies* 35.4 (1984): 197-216. Print.
- Westen, Drew. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*. New York: Public Affairs, 2007. Print.
- Wexler, Bruce. *Brain and Culture: Neurobiology, Ideology, and Social Change*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006. Print.
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 699-723. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. Print.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- . "Organic Empathy: Feminism, Psychopharmaceuticals, and the Embodiment of Depression." *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana UP: 2008, 373-399. Print.
- Zablocki, Benjamin. "Towards a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Theory of Brainwashing." *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*. Eds. Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. 159-214. Print.

