

Affective Relations and Alterity: The Rhetorical Imperative and Rupture in Identification in International Human Rights Discourse

Review of Diane Davis, *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreign Relations* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), ix-214 pp. \$24.95 (paper); and Wendy Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognition, Feminisms* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), ix-275 pp. \$23.95 (paper).

In her seminal article “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” Lynn Worsham argues that emotions and affect¹ are often neglected in the pedagogical discourse of Composition and Rhetoric. She argues that “Without a fundamental revision in our conception of subjectivity and of our affective relationship to the world, the radical potential of recent pedagogy to reconstitute our emotional lives may be re-contained, in spite of its best intentions and the euphoria of its claims, as a strategy of condescension” (240). Such condescension, Worsham points out, stems from symbolic claims of identification and recognition that seemingly negate the social and emotional distance between privileged agents and the Others, “but without necessarily producing significant structural change in the social conditions of those who are subordinated” (241). Thus, Worsham calls for a schooling in emotion and affect to uncover such implicit social violence.

Since the article’s publication in 1998, the affective dimension of rhetoric and writing continues to haunt the field. While scholars such as Ellen Quandahl and Jeffrey Walker have argued that affect and emotion are intertwined with ethics and virtues in Aristotelian rhetoric, a detailed survey of undergraduate rhetoric textbooks conducted by Gretchen Flesher Moon shows that most authors see pathos as nothing more than a rhetorical strategy for persuasion subordinate to ethos and logos. As Laura R. Miccichie points out, recent rhetoric textbooks only “introduce the Aristotelian pathetic appeal as a kind of plug-in tool for evaluating how a writer

‘plays on’ a reader’s emotions” (19). Seeing affect and emotion only as functions of rhetorical effectiveness neglects the claim Worsham makes earlier: a commitment to social change cannot be realized until we rethink our affective relations to each other and to our surroundings.

The authors of the texts reviewed here implicitly take up Worsham’s challenge in critiquing the treatment of affect in contemporary rhetorical studies. Diane Davis’s *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreign Relations* and Wendy Hesford’s *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognition, Feminisms* decenter the conventionally privileged critical-rational discourse to examine the ethical dimension of our affective rhetorical relations with the Other. Explicitly engaging with Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Lévinas, these authors demonstrate that affect should be more critically considered if we are to examine the ethics behind our encounters with Otherness.

My discussion of these two texts will therefore focus on the authors’ examinations of affect and ethics towards the Others. Writing from a theoretical and transnational standpoint respectively, Davis and Hesford reveal why the field of rhetorical studies must reconsider the role of affect and emotions if we are to promote a more ethical encounter with the Other and to promote social justice. Davis’s book calls for a drastic reevaluation of one of the most fundamental assumptions in rhetorical studies and public sphere theories, namely that community and social relations are formed through symbolic exchanges and the act of meaning making. Critiquing the field for “remain[ing] mostly unaware of or unconcerned with an intersection of rhetoric and solidarity that neither references a preexisting essence of the individual (organism) nor installs, as a product of human work, an essence of the community (of the ‘common’)” (1), Davis sets out to examine the precognitive and affective relation one has with the other which is the condition for all symbolic exchanges. Basing her argument on

Lévinas's concept of being-for-other, Davis posits that a rhetorical imperative emerges prior to ontology and epistemology. But unlike Lévinas, Davis argues that rhetoric, rather than ethics, is first philosophy because that preoriginary affective tie with the Other creates the rhetorical imperative to respond and thus a fundamental inessential solidarity. The implication of this argument is far-reaching: it challenges the discipline's assumption that one forms a self-sufficient identity prior to being exposed to others, while shifting the focus from the essential said to the inessential saying.

In Chapter 1, Davis challenges Kenneth Burke's theory of identification and consubstantiality by arguing that such identification always already exists prior to the formation of self-identification; instead, what rhetoricians should be concerned with is disidentification which allows us to form an ethical relation with alterity without attempting to appropriate the Otherness as part of our own identity. Davis further posits that rhetoric exists prior to linguistic understanding by appealing to one's fundamental affectability and responsivity. Since the obligation for one to respond to the other posits an a priori ethical relation, Davis suggests that scholars in rhetorical studies need to reconsider what agency means. Following Lévinas, Davis argues that agency should not be seen as one's autonomy to fulfill one's responsibility to others because like the subject, agency is always already for-the-other and is not spontaneous. Here, Davis offers a piece of advice to rhetoricians who are interested in fulfilling their ethical tasks: "to approach speaking and writing, any form of the address, not simply or firstly as the means of communication (as servants of the said), but as communication itself, as modes of the saying, expositions of an ethical relation that precedes identity, intellection, and intentionality" (113).

The implication of Davis's argument extends beyond the field of rhetorical studies into transnational social justice. Toward the end of her book, Davis explores the concepts of justice,

hospitality, and responsible advocacy in the transnational context. Following Lévinas and Jacques Derrida, Davis posits that the entrance of the third party poses a limit to responsibility because the I needs to determine to whom is he/she the most responsible; this, in turn, calls for the thematization and comprehension of a state structure to bring reciprocity and equality into the relation between the I and the Other. Davis's argument here challenges canonical public sphere theories that posit that publics are formed by self-sufficient individuals or through symmetrical social relations. It also implies that one will always face the tension between the affective unconditional ethical responsibility to the other and reasonable conditional civic responsibility constructed by the state institution; without the latter, the infinite obligation to the Other will only lead to endless sacrificial exchanges without justice or equality.

Davis further applies this balancing act between the preoriginary law and the reasonable laws to the concept of hospitality to determine an intermediate schema between situated moral and political laws and the law of infinite hospitality to the Other. The central question is, as Davis puts it, “how to engage a rhetorical *practice* that embraces and affirms the rhetorical imperative” (135)? In other words, how can the said encompass the ethics of saying? Here, Davis uses a concrete case study to illustrate how this intermediary can be achieved and to argue for the political and practical significance of inessential solidarity: Derrida's support for the International Parliament of Writers (IPW).

The IPW was first established to create the Network of Cities of Asylum—the participating cities promise to protect writers who were threatened by fundamentalist groups. Derrida urges that these cities must rise beyond nation-states “in order to become, to coin a phrase in a new and novel way, a *free city*” (qtd. in Davis 139) that embraces not only famous writers but also other refugees. At the same time, Derrida also emphasizes that this theoretical

vision is indissociable from practical and political implementations. The tension between fulfilling the unconditional law of hospitality and practicing the conditional political laws involves rhetorical reasoning to achieve justice by calculating the risks. At the same time, Derrida is careful to emphasize that one should not “shut the door on what cannot be calculated, meaning the future and the foreigner...That’s the double law of hospitality. It defines the unstable place of strategy and decision” (140). Occupying this unstable place allows the cities to negotiate between conditional practices and the unconditional ideal. Examining this example as a case of successful and responsible advocacy, Davis makes clear that,

Responsible advocacy would not aim to prevent or even postpone decisions. By exposing the radical undecidability inherent in the contra-diction [between the conditional law and the unconditional laws], it would aim to make decisions possible...[and] to expose and embrace the rhetorical imperative, the infinite obligation to respond that is the condition for decision, and so for ethics and politics—for any public and any rhetorical space. (143)

This closing remark prompts rhetoricians to rethink what their responsibilities are: in addition to analyzing and finding means of persuasion, they also need to be attuned to the rhetorical imperative and inessential solidarity that creates the condition for rhetorical practice.

Like Davis, Hesford seeks to understand how affect functions between the self and the Other, and to critique the politics of identification and recognition commonly found between the suffering subject and the spectator. Writing at a time when images of the suffering Other saturate the media, Hesford examines “the incorporation of subjects (individuals, communities, nations) through imaging technologies and discourses of vision and violation into the normative frameworks of a human rights internationalism based on United Nations (UN) documents and treaties” (7). In other words, rather than analyzing individual images, Hesford is concerned with

situating visual representations of transnational human rights discourse in social and rhetorical processes. By attending to the intercontextuality of transnational human rights spectacles, Hesford studies how visualization enables certain systems of identification and creates instances of (mis)recognition between the privileged spectator and the suffering Other.

Through four case studies, Hesford argues against the presumption that the cultivation of transnational affective relations and identifications between the Western audience and the suffering Other can lead to social justice. Hesford points out that the humanist orientation of this presumption fails to account for the cultural, material, and historical difference that influence the politics of identification and recognition, and risk perpetuating the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Her book, therefore, is a call to examine how human rights discourse both produces and becomes implicated in the normative practices of recognition and identification; she also sets out to critique:

...[the] appropriations of human suffering in activist, cultural, and legal contexts, as well as Western democratic nations' use of images to deflect attention from their own human rights violations by turning other nations into spectacle of violence (Chow, 1991), mapping 'the world in terms of spectator zones and sufferer zones' (Chouliaraki 2006, 83). (7)

The implication for human rights advocates is that, by seeing the current discourse of human rights as rhetorical practices that are embedded within specific historical and political contexts, they will be more likely to critique the power imbalance between the spectator and the suffering Other—the spectator as the holders of rights who bestow justice and morality to the Other. Hesford's theoretical and ethical orientation also warns against the celebration of difference by privileged spectators and advocates as an act to recenter themselves.

Thus, Hesford offers a framework for ethical and responsible spectatorship that takes into consideration the range cultural, social, and political forces and rhetorical conventions behind the call for a witnessing public. Echoing Davis's argument, Hesford argues that the ethics of witnessing participates in the "economy of affect" (57) and should not be interpreted as mere rhetorical strategies for identification; thus, she calls for a posthumanist ethical vision that critically examines concepts of "rhetorical intentionality, transparency, and autonomy" (194). The discourse's heavy reliance on theories of subjectivity and agency reinforces the Hegelian master-slave dialectic: that the self must "supersede the other" (cited in Hesford 40). So while current human rights discourse claims to equalize the advocates and the suffering subjects, it often reinforces the exact identity categories it seeks to contest. At the same time, subjects will only be protected by international human rights law if they are recognized as belonging to a specific identity category.

Hesford's critique of the politics of recognition stems from the contradiction she exposes in international human rights laws and declarations. She points out that while human rights internationalism claims to recognize the universal ethical status of all people, they continue to be based on the dominant "white, male, heterosexual, and propertied" body (35). Moreover, international human rights laws often rely on a framework of nation-state citizenship for recognition, thus contradicting the supposed universality of human rights beyond social and legal recognitions. "The scene of recognition," Hesford further points out, "wrapped in American internationalist gift-giving rhetoric, appears to enable mutual recognition, but this scene often does little more than consummate an unequal exchange" (33). Current international human rights discourse thus often works to recenter the dominant structure without ethically advancing the status of the marginalized Other.

Here, Hesford engages with theorists such as Judith Butler and Kelly Oliver to posit a human rights discourse that move beyond the politics of recognition by understanding subjectivity as dependent upon addressability. For Hesford, this concept of subjectivity, coupled with the understanding of witnessing as a contingent rhetorical act, should form the basis of a new critical approach to human rights discourse. While she acknowledges phenomenology helpful in conceptualizing a non-egocentric moral gaze and the fundamental intersubjectivity of perception, Hesford is dissatisfied with its reduction of individual differences and its negligence of social and rhetorical processes. And these theoretical tensions are played out in four case studies, ranging from photographs from Abu Ghraib, to documentaries on Southeast Asian children. In doing so, and by examining the truth-telling genre of testimony, Hesford posits a “differentiated politics of recognition (a differential universalism)” (100): each woman’s testimonial is particular, yet it is also situated within a collective experience. Listening to individual testimonies without seeing the spectacles of the atrocity, the audience experiences an estrangement from the familiar frames of rhetorical engagement with the suffering subjects, and thus a failure in identification that fuses the self with the Other. For Hesford, this lack of identification prompts the viewers to contextualize such an absence within more complex cultural, historical, and political relations; this rupture in identification and recognition, then, promotes an ethical relation that Hesford looks for: an empathetic unsettlement that “recognizes and respects the alterity of the other” (198).

Davis’s and Hesford’s projects both stem from a concern with the affective relation between self and other: while Davis extrapolates from this relation to posit a theory of a preoriginary moral rhetorical imperative, Hesford sets out to critique the illusion that “cultivating affective cross-cultural and transnational identifications through the arts and humanities will lead

to social justice” (190). And I’d argue that their projects intersect, despite the seeming divergence of their arguments. But Hesford’s emphasis on rhetorical contingency and historical processes both answer and trouble the question Davis poses at the beginning of her book:

What would it mean for our theories of social change or for public sphere studies if it could be shown that the speaking subject is the product neither of self-determination nor of structural overdetermination but instead emerges, each time, according to a relationality and responsivity irreducible to dramatic mappings? (2-3)

My aim here is not to compare Davis and Hesford, but to examine how a theory of inessential solidarity and preexisting intersubjectivity plays out in what Hesford calls the “visual and affective economies of the global morality market” (150). I also argue that Hesford’s project and her focus on intercontextuality and materiality demonstrate the limitation of Davis’s theory.

Hesford’s overarching theoretical goal is to critique the politics of identification and recognition in current human rights discourse because it reinforces a dialectical relationship between the privileged viewer and the suffering other while perpetuating an asymmetrical power relation that recenters the human rights advocates or nation-states themselves. For example, Hesford describes a public performance where Oprah Winfrey unveils an Afghan woman while reading Eve Ensler’s poem “Under the Burqa”—a poem written in the voice of an Afghan woman who lives under Taliban rule. Later, Ensler writes that “To allow another’s pain to enter us, forces us to examine our own values, ...insists that we be responsible for others, [and] compels us to act” (qtd. in Hesford 6). Hesford argues that “Ensler may imagine solidarity as a byproduct of affective identification with another’s pain, but, like Zoya’s unveiling, identification in *Insecure at Last* validates her own presence. In this way, Ensler’s imaginative identifications are a form of self-recognition” (6).

Davis's theory on the ethics of (dis)identification intersects with Hesford's critique of Ensler as both reject turning the Other into part of the self. Davis argues that "It's only in the failure of identification, each time, that 'I' am opened to the other *as* other and get the chance to experience something like responsibility for the other that exceeds (and conflicts with) 'my' narcissistic passions" (35). Later, Davis posits that the preoriginary ethical relation between the self and the other would be violated if the radical alterity of the other is turned into a masterable concept by cognition and understanding. Any affective and ethical relation with the other exists only when "the communication that takes place here is not appropriative understanding but a depropriative interruption." (80). What Davis points to is an encounter with the other that challenges the self-sufficiency of one's subjectivity, while respecting the radical alterity of the other without trying to appropriate it.

The notion of a non-appropriative encounter with the Other plays out in Hesford's example of Ensler's poem and the unveiling of Zoya by an American public figure that supposedly promote identification. Although Ensler urges the viewers to experience the other's pain, that rhetorical act in effect allows her to recognize herself as a human rights activist at the position power who can bestow justice onto the other—Hesford calls this "projective identification," or "the defensive projection of parts of the self onto another" (198). While this critique of identification aligns with Davis's argument, Hesford does not acknowledge a prior affective relation between the self and the other; she engages Dominick LaCapra's concept of empathetic unsettlement as the counterpart of projective identification because this notion "recognizes and respects the other and does not compel or authorize one 'to speak in the other's voice or to take the other's place, for example, as a surrogate victim or perpetrator" (qtd. in Hesford 90).

The difference between their positions is the difference between where they see one's affectability. For Davis, this ethical affectability is fundamental and precedes cognition, understanding, and symbolic exchanges; for Hesford, on the contrary, one can only be ethically affected by critically examining one's emotions, rather than the peoriginary affects. As Hesford later makes clear, she is less interested in the prediscursive than the historical and political construction of emotions, and how that becomes implicated into the politics of recognition in human rights discourse (51). As I will later demonstrate, Hesford's inclination puts the applicability of Davis's theory into question; it also prompts rhetoricians and other public scholars to ask how the prediscursive can be traced and analyzed in relation to contexts and materiality.

As Hesford's project makes clear, however, Davis's theory on subjectivity can be useful and to rhetoricians who study human rights discourse and the politics of recognition. Attempting to configure a reciprocal relation between the self and the other without either reifying the hierarchy or supporting the illusion of universality, Hesford agrees that human rights scholars and activists must rethink theories of subjectivity. She cites Oliver extensively to argue that subjectivity should be understood dialogically in terms of "response-ability and address-ability" (qtd. in Hesford 42). Since Oliver, like Davis, borrows heavily from Lévinas, it is not surprising that both of them agree that "otherness is always internal to subjectivity and encounters with others" (Oliver qtd. in Hesford 42). Likewise, Hesford's critique of Oliver's theory poses a challenge to Davis as well: Hesford charges Oliver for not considering the social, historical, and material conditions that produce the politics of recognition and the predominant principles of human rights.

But I'd argue that Hesford's critique does so much point to the deficiency of Davis's theory as to the divergence of their projects. Davis's notion that subjectivity stems from one's obligation to respond to and address others, however, remain helpful for Hesford in examining how the act of ethical witnessing can move beyond the politics of recognition. Hesford points out that thinking of subjectivity in terms of one's fundamental response-ability to others connotes witnessing in both juridical and religious terms. Here, Hesford get closer to the discourse of phenomenology to break down the self-other and subject-object hierarchy in the Hegelian model of recognition. She engages with Lévinas's concept of encountering the face and the calling forth of the third party. Citing Lévinas at length, Hesford argues that his notion of the third party "might be understood as the projected and sought-after witness of human suffering—a witness, however, who, in seeking an ethical relation to the other, is caught up in a struggle with the norms of social and legal recognition" (50).

Davis in turn complicates Hesford's interpretation of Lévinas, and prompts rhetoricians to rethink the relationship between the spectator and the arbiter of justice in human rights discourse. Davis posits that with the entry of the third party, and thus the interruption of the infinite obligation to respond to the other, state institutions, power structures, and the laws become necessary to exercise justice. The I, then, is caught between the norms and laws set by the state, and the unconditional law that demands an infinite responsibility to others; any decision will thus be caught in "this aporetic tension between unconditional ethical responsibility and conditional civic or moral responsibility. There is no way to decide without facing this impossible contra-diction, without first undergoing this experience of radical *undecideability*" (Davis 127).

Applying Davis's interpretation of Lévinas to Hesford's project, the I cannot at the same time be *both* a third party witness and be caught within the tension between the conditional norms and the unconditional obligation. And Hesford's attempt to override the politics of recognition through the theory of intersubjectivity posits the I—who also stands for the spectator—in an inherent ethical relation with the other; thus, it is not possible for the I to be locked in this infinite obligation while rising beyond it as a third party witness. According to Davis, the spectator cannot occupy more than one of those positions within the triangulation of the I, the Other, and the third party. While Hesford is not interested in examining the origin of justice and the necessity of civic and legal norms, her divergence with Davis on spectatorship brings out the possibility for the witnessing I to fulfill only a finite and fair responsibility by engaging with the constructed norms of social justice.

What Hesford is more concerned with is the discursive constructions and representations of human subjects in international human rights discourse. Thus, she finds phenomenology unsatisfying in that it sees perception as prediscursive. Hesford argues that a phenomenological orientation will not help her critique the inadequacies of the current legal and social recognition because, like the current framework, the Others represented in phenomenology “do not appeal to particularity or difference but to universality and sameness, although the appeal is initiated by difference” (51). Hesford's critique is apt here because even in Davis's reading of Lévinas, the others are only distinguished from the I by their radical alterity with no mentions of internal differences among themselves. Since Hesford is critical of the current legal and political framework for its intention to universalize, it is not surprising that Lévinas's and Davis's theories no longer remain relevant to her. As most rhetorical work is contingent upon social and political

contexts, Hesford's divergence from Davis poses a deeper question: to what extent is the notion of prediscursive solidarity helpful in analyzing public discourse?

Hesford's close attention to the context, materiality, and historicity of human rights discourse influences her definition of agency. Hesford points out that "human rights discourse has not sufficiently accounted for the disaggregation of agency at distinct levels or for interlocutors that do not constitute a national citizenry" (154). In other words, agency is mostly seen as a singular possession by a recognizable individual or group. "In rhetorical studies," Hesford states, "agency has traditionally been construed through the concept of intentionality—a concept that depends on an autonomous subject and an identifiable (often understood as a temporally and geographically static) audience and rhetorical context" (154). Seeing agency intercontextually, then, would entail understanding the concept as enabled and restricted by various material forces and cultural discourses.

Here, Hesford and Davis intersect once again—but only briefly. Davis would agree with Hesford that agency is not an individual possession, nor is it a personal project; rather, she contends that agency is not a freedom to choose, but is always already assigned through the extra-symbolic responsibility to respond to others. Like Hesford, Davis is wary of a definition of agency that inscribes an individual as possessing a self-contained subjectivity; however, while Hesford is redefining agency to purport the significance of intercontextuality and materiality, Davis is more concerned with the ethical function of rhetoric. For Davis, a "nonheroic ethical structuring of subjectivity" (112) would entail the negation of individual agency in fulfilling one's ethical responsibility to the other based on the presumption that there is always a prior obligation—a rhetorical imperative—to respond.

The divergence between Hesford and Davis can be traced back once again to their respective interest in symbolic exchanges and representations, and the prediscursive affective relation between the self and the other. Operating on a more conventional form of rhetorical inquiry, Hesford performs rhetorical analysis on how human right spectacles are represented and framed within specific legal and cultural contexts; in Davis's term, Hesford is focusing on the said, rather than the saying. Davis's notion of agency (or the lack thereof) and her emphasis on the saying poses tremendous difficulty for rhetoricians because it nullifies one of the most common foci for rhetorical studies while pointing towards an untraceable and supposedly universal phenomenon.

While the applicability of Davis's theory in public discourse remains questionable, Davis and Hesford share in common a critique of an individualistic theorization of subjectivity and agency. In many ways, Hesford is in agreement with Davis that a subject is not self-sufficient and contained; this notion is, in fact, Hesford's theoretical basis for challenging the politics of recognition and identification in human rights discourse. However, Hesford is unable or reluctant to take Davis's phenomenological underpinning any further because there is a disjunction between the prediscursive, the material, and the contextual. To see how rhetoric—in the conventional sense—plays out in human rights discourse and in legal narratives is to study its contingency on contexts and on various material and cultural forces. And this demonstrates the difficulty rhetoric scholars are likely to experience when they attempt to apply Davis's theory in their study of contingent and contextual discursive practices. Since the rhetorical imperative Davis puts forward is non-contingent and acontextual, it challenges not only how rhetoric scholars should think about ethics and responsibility, but also how rhetoric should be examined.

As a result, even though both Davis and Hesford are examining how affect and emotion function in rhetoric and in one's relation to other, their projects remain largely diverged from one another: the affective relation that Davis is most concerned with cannot be traced by Hesford's theory of intercontextuality. On the other hand, the affective relation Hesford critiques is one that is formed by symbolic exchanges and representations, and one that misleads human rights activists into thinking that identification through affect and emotion can foster universal human rights. My point, then, is that Hesford's contextualized and historicized case studies and her emphasis materiality reveal the limitations of Davis's theory in research on human rights discourse and transnational studies. While the notion of inessential solidarity prompts new questions for scholars who study social change, its applicability to rhetoric remains questionable because it is incongruent with a focus on contingency, difference, and materiality.

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Note

¹ While affect and emotion are intricately connected, they are not interchangeable terms. Quoting Brian Massumi, Rebecca Dingo defines affect “as a sort of pre-speakable bodily intensity” (176). Similarly, Laura Micciche sees affect as “preverbal, visceral conditions that encompass emotion and feeling” (15). Emotion, on the other hand, is affect translated “into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized” (Massumi, qtd. in Dingo 176). In other words, while emotion can perform meanings, affect is prelinguistic.

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