



## BEYOND THE NAMES OF THE PEOPLE

Disinterring the body politic

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# Elizabeth A. Povinelli

## BEYOND THE NAMES OF THE PEOPLE

### Disinterring the body politic

*This essay scrutinizes the theoretical foundations of Laclau's notion of rhetoric and the rhetorical. It juxtaposes to Laclau's reliance on Saussurean linguistics, especially its elementary vocabulary of the signifier and signified, a model of rhetoric based on non-linguistic and linguistic modes of rhetoric and interpretation.*

**Keywords** liberalism; liberal politics; Laclau; structuralism; pragmatism; rhetoric

#### 1.

To judge from recent publications, the spirit of the times is returning to 'the political', to the question of the concept of 'the political' and to the question of how a particular type of political formation – democracy – constitutes and is constituted by rhetoric and rhetorical figures. Several fundamental questions about the specific nature of democratic politics have re-emerged. Do democratic political formations allow the people to speak? Or do democracies, in grounding their legitimacy in the people, demand that all claims made on it be in the figure (name) of 'the people' – 'the people' being the proper subject of democratic processes. In other words, is rhetoric the foundation rather than merely the tool of democratic politics? If so how does understanding this rhetorical foundation – to be democratic all claims must be made in the name of 'the people' – help us better understand the nature of the political in democracies? What conceptual advantage do we gain by considering 'the people' to be a rhetorical figure rather than a pre-rhetorical social referent? Who would have predicted such a decisive return to the issues of rhetoric in political theory at the very moment that many scholars have declared the insufficiencies of the linguistic turn for apprehending the forces of neo-liberal capitalism and the material inequalities they are producing?

The return to the rhetorical foundations of democratic politics is in part motivated by a new set of material forces and material inequalities plaguing a post-cold war world and by a new set of governmental techniques emerging

from the so-called war on terror. This historical conjuncture is producing a new raft of interred, interned and rotting bodies at the periphery and in the centre of the democratic heartland. One does not have to adhere to the ever-expanding concept of the 'state of exception' to be outraged by how various democratically grounded political parties use the rhetoric of the people to expunge certain bodies not merely from democratic borders but from the border of the human itself. Surely the democratic order is in a crisis when civil and physical death is increasingly the governing techniques of democratic rather than totalitarian states, when democratic governments justify, and attempt to legitimate, the production of this new level of violence and maiming vis-à-vis the protection of democratic people and the democratic way of life, and when freedom is increasingly the rhetorical figure within which governments make torture sensible and practical.

Many people have pointed out that the majority of the people within and without contemporary democracies do not support the specific policies of the Bush and Blair governments. The problem is not with democracy as a political formation so much as with the distortion of the democratic process. The problem is that the people are not being heard. Or they are not able to organize their voices in such a way that they can hegemonize the political field. Their voices are too unruly, and this unruliness is exploited to maintain foreign and domestic politics that have only an awkward relation to democratic principle. The problem is a problem of voicing, how the people as a rhetorical source, figure and effect is voiced. The solution is to better understand the relationship among these rhetorical elements so that the people can speak. As a result, if the literal decay and sacrifice of certain bodies within the increasingly cramped space of the new democratic order has placed increasing pressure on how we conceive the relationship among the political, the democratic and the rhetorical, the material nature and sources of political rhetoric – and in particular the materiality of the political subjects of democracies – rapidly collapses into linguistic fact or analogy.

If my opening gambit is a poetic homage to the first line of Paul De Man's *Allegories of Reading*, it is also a not so subtle observation that current discussions about the political and about the proper subject of the political rely on specific concepts of the material nature and sources of rhetoric and the rhetorical. Whether they mean to or not these recent discussions reduce all forms of rhetoric to linguistically based models of rhetoric. Ernesto Laclau's recent *On Populist Reason* is certainly an exemplary case of how the rhetorical, its epistemological and ontological character and its material braces and slippages, rapidly collapses into linguistic fact or analogy, *despite* his theoretical sophisticated, intentions and desires. Striving to defend the name of the people as the political subject par excellence and popularism as the exemplary logic of the political, Laclau turns to a post-Saussurean psychoanalytically informed account of the empty signifier as the basis for a reinvigorated radical democracy. Laclau's aim is the sedimented realm of social process. But, as I

will argue here, his end lands far from a vigorous account of 'social sediment'; if we are to understand this phrase to function as more than mere metaphor. It is as much for its frustrated goals as its successful ends that *On Populist Reason* serves as necessary text for any attempt to understand the limits of a specific concept of the rhetorical for understanding the capacitation and incapacitation of democratic politics and its proper subject.

This essay scrutinizes the theoretical foundations of Laclau's notion of rhetoric and the rhetorical. It juxtaposes to Laclau's reliance on Saussurean linguistics, especially its elementary vocabulary of the signifier and signified, a model of rhetoric based on non-linguistic and linguistic modes of rhetoric and interpretation. Here again it proves helpful to refer to De Man's *Allegories* but this time not merely as a poetic homage. In his discussion of the interpretive divide between grammatical meaning and rhetorical meaning, De Man evokes the understanding of rhetoric offered by Kenneth Burke and the American pragmatist, Charles Sanders Peirce. De Man is primarily interested in a certain 'semiological enigma' of critical reading: The undecidability between literal and figural meanings through 'grammatical or other linguistic devices' (p. 10). Thus, like Laclau, he tracks how metaphors connote the 'formal potential of the signifier' (p. 31). But Peirce understood grammatical devices as merely one of three different grounds of rhetoric. For Peirce (1998), to read is to engage in a process of interpretation that has three different grounds – affective (emotional), energetic or logical–symbolic–linguistic. All 'readings', critical and otherwise, are some combination of these three elemental units of semiosis. And all of them figure a relationship between two other signs (or a sign and its object), i.e. they are rhetorical. The feeling of rage in the vicinity of neoconservative politics would, for Peirce, be an example of an affective interpretant. Rage is an affective sign that interprets (critically interprets) and thus connects the subject to her political context. She might then reflect on this rage and establish through reflexive thought some language specific sense of it. She might symbolically interpret this affective interpretant through the various political registers and genres available, such as evidence of her political allegiance or she might affective interpret it becoming proud or scared of her rage. Or she might be paralyzed, discovering that her self-understanding as a committed pacifist is out of joint with the direction of her feelings. In any case this spiralling matrix of signs is political semiosis.

To demonstrate how this alternative model of rhetoric and the rhetorical would alter our understanding of the political conditions of actually existing democratic orders, the essay begins by examining the stakes of Laclau's decision to ground the rhetorical structure of the people in the rhetorical potentials of the empty signifier. What advantage does Laclau's concept of the empty signifier gain over other theories of democratic political rhetoric such as Ranciere's discussion of democratic politics as defined by the difference between *logos* and *phonos*? How might we reread theorists like Schmitt through this concept of the empty signifier? The purpose of this section is to tease out

how, in spite of his intentions and the potential power of his approach, Laclau collapses political processes into a specific linguistic theory that continually deflects analysis away from the body politic and its institutional sedimentation. The essay then turns to two doorframes – a men’s bathroom in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago and the front door of an indigenous Australian family’s house in the Northern Territory of Australia – to explicate an alternative model of social rhetoric that includes linguistic models of interpretation but does not reduce interpretation (or critical reading) to a linguistic model or analogy. I use the first doorframe to build up the vocabulary of the alternative model of rhetoric I am proposing. This vocabulary includes the elements and dynamics of what are always internally diverse and unstable matrixes of interpretation. I use the second doorframe to demonstrate how the coherence and incoherence of these elements of interpretation within the political subject are the effect of larger social processes and institutions that give force to and enforce one matrix of interpretation rather than another.

I make three broad claims in this essay. First, I agree with Laclau’s sense that rhetoric is as much the foundation as the tool of democratic politics. But, not only do I disagree with how Laclau theoretically anchors his model of rhetoric, I want to suggest a kind of social analysis that might be possible – assuming that the aim and end of a political theory is social sediment – if we were to make a decisive break with the logic of the Saussurean sign (not merely structuralism, but the language of the signifier and the signified) and its continuing hold on the humanistic social sciences. Second, I want to begin to sketch out an alternative conceptual vocabulary for this non-Saussurean model of political rhetoric in late liberal democratic orders. What are the various modes of rhetoric that compose the ‘people’ of liberal democratic orders? How are they related to each other in theory and in social practice? How does understanding these various modes of rhetoric help explain how and why political movement emerges, or not, in specific contexts? The alternative conceptual vocabulary presented in this essay takes from as it confronts the limits of various non-linguistic models of critical reading, including the earlier work of Heidegger, Peirce’s pragmatism, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Foucault’s critique. Finally, I want to begin to reintegrate something we might call a post-essentialist materiality into our political analysis. Thus my interest in foregrounding non-linguistic embodied forms of critical reading as essential to understanding the emergence of the people. Let me say a bit more about this.

Talking about rhetoric as grounded in bodies and materialities can produce feelings of ambivalence for some critical theorists in part because mentioning bodies and their materialities is to forget that bodies and materialities are always stretching, reacting and forming their physiologies and intensities in the domain of discourse. And mentioning bodies and materialities would seem to forget that even if there were flesh on one side and discourse on the other, neither of these sides is singular, homogeneous or reducible to a unitary axis.

What flesh, affect, disposition, where and when? And which discourse, where and when? And, finally, mentioning bodies and materialities would seem to forget that bodies and materialities are always within and spilling out of demanding environments and institutions. So let me try to be clear (see also Povinelli 2006). When I question the mode of rhetoric currently on offer in political theory, I am not thereby hoping to smuggle back into critical political analysis a pre-discursive, inert body or an essential materiality. Instead I am interested in how political rhetoric might depend on the socially built space between the various historically embodied grounds of rhetoric. In this account, flesh is no less a set of political manoeuvres and tactics, neither uniform nor unified, than is language (see also Massumi 1992, Gil 1998). To make political sense – to constitute ‘a people’ – democratic politics must be shaped, etched and registered through physicalities, fabricated habitudes, habituated visions. These habituated materialities leave behind new material habitats that will be called on to replicate, justify, defy and interfere with given sense-making and with the distribution of life and death, wealth and poverty that this sense-making makes possible. In this account rhetoric is always already within the body – although not uniformly or univocally. Thus we need to understand the demanding environments that capacitate and incapacitate the circuits that connect affective, energetic and symbolic dimensions of rhetoric in such a way that the body politic is produced and disturbed. The aim of this essay is, therefore, not to demonstrate how the body determines the rhetorical nature of the political. Instead, I want to discuss how the various embodied grounds of interpretation would change how we approached the relationship between the rhetoric of the people and the nature of the political.

## 2.

*On Populist Reason* makes two powerful claims about the nature of the political and the rhetorical that bear serious engagement for any student of contemporary democratic politics. The first is that the political is a discrete social domain whose nature needs to be defined if political philosophy is to secure its proper object (and subject). Thus, Marchant’s (forthcoming) reading of *On Populist Reason* as primarily interested in establishing the proper name of the political subject to describe the actual grounds of political practice and its social sedimentations seems correct to me. The second point is that ‘the people’ is a rhetorical effect figure of the empty signifier. Laclau is very clear about what he means by an empty signifier. For Laclau the empty signifier is not without content in the way that a vacuum is empty of air pressure. Quite the contrary: The signifier is empty in the sense that it is maximally full (‘an empty fullness’, 2005, p. 106), so full that it stands for things that are not only unnamed but also unnamable. So full in fact that even as the irreducible

heterogeneity passing through the empty signifier creates centring effects, it also creates a space of political antagonism outside the totalizing enclosures of structuralism and dialectics. Political antagonisms cannot be predetermined from the point of view of the structure because the centring effects they produce do not presuppose a determination in the last instance; and antagonisms will never be dialectical because the elements of antagonism do not meet on a common level of discourse (see for instance, Laclau 2005, p. 69, 83–85, 148–149). As a result, the empty signifier is not merely maximally available to the irreducible heterogeneity of demands, identities, aspirations and outcomes but also knots this heterogeneity together in such a way that it provides the external frontier so fundamental to populist politics – the designation of the one who claims to be inside but is, in this hegemonic act, thrown outside the people. The empty signifier is radically promiscuous in democratic politics. All sorts of figures can stand in for the name of the people and its external frontier: Humanist and Terrorist; Feminist and Misogynist; the People, the Multitude, Friend/Enemy. These phonic waves are catachrestic figures through which an infinite possibility of desires, meanings and identities are knotted together in such a way that they constitute and unsettle the given time of political hegemony.

Laclau is hardly the first political theorist to reflect on the relationship between the political and the sedimented realm of social processes. Some time ago, Claude Lefort (1989) discussed the division of semantic and social space of out which the political and non-political emerged. Nor is he alone in trying to understand the relationship between forms of discourse and the emergence of democratic politics. Jacques Ranciere (1998, p. 2) rests the distinction between democratic politics and the police on the difference between ‘speech, which expresses’ (*logos*) and the alien voice, which ‘simply indicates’ (*phonos*). At stake for him are the different political capacities of *logos* and *phonos* rather than rhetoric or the nature of the empty signifier. Whereas voice can only indicate pain and pleasure – is mere noise – speech can express the just and the unjust, the useful and harmful. ‘Discursive articulation of a grievance’ is altogether different from ‘the phonic articulation of a groan’ (1998, p. 2). Grievance constitutes the subject as part of a community, while the groan merely indicates that the utterer is a part of sentient life. *Logos* allows the non-monstrous to emerge from the monstrous, the man from the sludge of existential otherness.

If Laclau is not alone in his attempt to understand the political in relation to processes of social sedimentation, nor alone in his attempt to reflect on the role that *phonos* (signifier) and *logos* (signified) play in this process, he does, nevertheless, have a singular commitment to a reading of the political subject and the hegemonic process through a Lacanian influenced Saussurian account of rhetoric. The potential of his approach to the rhetorical structure of a politics grounded in ‘the people’ is suggested by how Laclau might read the anti-rhetorical political philosophy of Carl Schmitt (1996, 2006). As is well known,

Schmitt did not consider the state's power to decide the friend/enemy distinction to be based on metaphorical or rhetorical powers. For Schmitt, state power *potentiated* – it created concrete existential beings and determined their manner of being in the world of states and citizens (see also Lefort 1989, p. 216). This is what the political state does; and when it can no longer do so it is no longer a political state. This right to kill – 'the authority to decide, in the form of a verdict on life and death, the *jus vitae ac necris*' (Schmitt 1996, p. 47) – was not, as Foucault (1991) would claim, a prehistory of modern power. It was an essential pre-requisite to modern political sovereignty.

But it is exactly here that Laclau's argument that 'the people' is an effect and figure of rhetoric shows some of its potential power. Remember, Schmitt's state is not defined by the essential concepts of the political (friend/enemy) so much as by its ability to designate them (as well, of course, as to declare its own legal suspension). It becomes clear then that although Schmitt explicitly rejects the metaphorical and rhetorical nature of state power, his account of proper state function and his account of the actual liberal parliamentary system in which he lived relied on the rhetorical nature of the political in two distinct but important ways. First, the nature of the Schmittian state is designatory – baptismal in the Kripkean sense – and thus already within a linguistic horizon. Laclau would no doubt agree with this Kripkean counter-descriptivism, although he would translate the meaning of the rigid-designator into the 'emancipation of the signifier from any enthrallment to the signified' (p. 102). For Laclau, the guarantee of the object's integrity – in Schmitt's case, the designation of friend/enemy distinction – is the retroactive effect of baptismal naming. Quoting Žižek, 'What is overlooked, at least in the standard version of antidescriptivism, is that this guaranteeing of an object in all counterfactual situations – *through all its descriptive features* – is the retroactive effect of naming itself: it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object' (pp. 102–103). As a result, categories such as friend–enemy do not reveal the true logic of the political. Rather they are the empty signifiers that allow a politics to emerge at a specific catachrestic juncture of popular movements.

There is second sense in which, against his own account, Schmitt's political theology is rhetorical in nature. Here we remember that Schmitt was not writing within what he considered to be a true political state. He was fully aware, in other words, that if his true political state was to be, it had to be birthed from within the existing liberal parliamentary system. In other words, Schmitt had to persuade, win over, convince and motivate into being a world that did not as yet exist. Social space had to be rhetorically prepared if the baptismal power of the friend/enemy were to be sensible and compelling – in Rancière's terms, if it were to enter the order of the visible and sayable. What is invisible must become visible, what is intangible tangible. And so the social categories and coordinates of friend/enemy must become apparent to anyone with eyes – the perceptual field had to be shaped to produce these eyes. *The*



*Concept of the Political* is a beautiful example of how rhetoric is deployed to shape this political subject. Through complex tropes of war, Schmitt creates a set of social coordinates (friend–enemy) which themselves pre-suppose all sorts of discontinuities with other social relations and social destinies (kin, caste, religion, intimate stranger) and which are based not on the actual state but a potential state. In other words, *The Concept of the Political* is not a descriptive political science any more than the Bush Administration’s 2002 and 2006 *National Security Strategies* (see Wagner-Pacifici, 2008). Friend, enemy, freedom is sedimented in the social imaginary through his writings, lectures and jurisprudence so that they can be seen, heard, anticipated, feared and followed. It is a manifesto, the prolegomenon, to a state that might be. It is also an obituary, much as Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* was obituary and manifesto, suffused with melancholy for a form of the state that never existed and may well never exist.

We can see how Laclau’s interest in the rhetorical foundations of the political provides a provocative interpretation of Schmitt – and the conditions of the current Bush Administration’s state of terror for that matter. But if political meanings are based on a set of unique, as of yet not realized, figural conditions and on making these conditions persuasive in the world of policy that is, in fact, dominated by other logics, then why would anyone listen? And how do they ‘listen’? If the friend–enemy distinction is not a descriptive category of actual life but a figural baptism necessary to produce political life then what person in their right mind will agree to give birth to the thing that might potentially murder her? What motivates her to take up these positions, to experience herself and others in these terms – these names? What animates, motivates and disseminates these names of identity and identification? The state – or more precisely, Schmitt – can say all it wants, call people by whatever names it chooses, by why do people obey, turn to these names (see also Butler 1997)? As Bourdieu (1998) asked, why are certain people invested in certain social games in such a way that they are ready to die for these games even as others are distinctly indifferent to the game, its terms, and its outcomes? And, most importantly, for the purposes of this essay, what are the broad rhetorical conditions in which such persuasive, motivation and identification occur?

Laclau answers that these identifications are the effect of the empty signifier and the processes of affective identification that emerges from it. To see what is at stake in reducing rhetoric to the play of the signifier, we need to push against his own account of what he is up to theoretically, including his account of his commitment to a language-based approach to the political. What Laclau *says* he is doing and not doing is very clear. He says he does not understand political rhetoric to be restricted to language and speech; thus, from his perspective, the motivations to assume the friend/enemy distinction are not merely linguistic. ‘Discourse is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such. By discourse, as I have attempted to make clear several times, I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the areas of

speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role' (p. 68). He also says, very clearly, that 'the construction of a "people" is not something which takes place just at the level of words and images: it is also sedimented in practices and institutions' (p. 106). Citing Wittgenstein's notion of language games, Laclau argues that the quilting function consists of 'material practices that can acquire institutional fixity' (p. 106). And yet, though Laclau clearly seeks something more robustly material than a linguistic-based model provides, the tools of analysis he uses are by-products of the Saussurean sign and the relationships he posits between such things as affect, materiality and institutions on the one hand and language on the other hand are figured through the Saussurean sign. The logic of combination and substitution, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic, the signifier and signified, negative differential relationality: these are the tools that Saussure used to found his semiology and the terms that others would disperse into critical social theory as if they were the only foundations to rhetorical analysis. More strikingly, all non-linguistic, discursive phenomena are derived from and mimetic to the 'signifying chain'. For instance, Laclau argues that signification and affect are not merely embedded phenomena but that affect is inseparable from signification to such a degree that there seems little meaningful difference between them. Indeed, affect barely disturbs, if it disturbs it at all, the internal logic of the signifying chain. Finally, although Laclau insists his model of rhetoric is attentive to the institutional life of the empty signifier, institutions, like affects, mimic rather than dynamically encounter the hegemonic process of particularization and universalization carried out by the empty signifier (p. 107).

As a result it is not clear whether it matters that Laclau repudiates the linguistically defined grounds of the Saussurean semiology. Granted, it is not completely clear how far afield from Saussure's semiology Laclau means to go. Soon after arguing that he is not conflating discourse and language he resituates his discursive approach in the linguistic formalism of the Copenhagen and Prague Linguistic Schools. So perhaps it is no surprise that the dynamism and source of political articulation remain subordinate to what we might as well call language since all other material grounds of rhetoric are absent from the account in any determinate sense. It is not that I doubt Laclau's desire to make affects and institutions matter to his analysis of the political subject. Rather I think that the model of rhetoric he relies on continually reduces these social materialities to a specific concept of the sign that was designed to break with the very social processes and life-worlds he seeks to apprehend. What surprise that all of his examples continually wend back to social practices that are primarily language based; e.g. people requesting then demanding housing, water, schooling. Popular movements constitute their universality by a linguistically expressed set of equivalences that stitch together a field even as it creates a border – a part that has no part among the People. Marchant (forthcoming) is right to view Laclau's project as the search for the (proper)

name of the political subject as ontological ground of the social and society. 'The name' will become 'the ground of the thing' (p. 101). The question is whether the genealogy of the rhetorical on which Laclau depends forces him to discount all aspects of the rhetorical not amenable to the determinative logic of the name, leaving all other material aspects of the body politic on the cutting floor. What is evacuated when grounding political rhetoric in the name of the post-Saussurian sign? What happens if we pull this foundation from under the theory of political rhetoric? What will be the conceptual vocabulary of an alternative model of rhetoric? How will this alternative model of rhetoric help elucidate the elements and dynamics of the interpretative matrixes that constitute political life within liberal democracies?

### 3.

To answer these questions let's proceed to a woman standing in front of a doorframe. Our protagonist will initially seem to be standing in isolation, experiencing the centring effects of the empty signifier. But her social isolation and these centring effects will be slowly unpacked to demonstrate the multiple social grounds of interpretation, the multiple and always potentially competing modes of interpretation, and the material nature and sources of interpretation.

In Haskell Hall, where the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago is located, the women's bathroom is located on the second floor, the men's on the third a stone's throw from what was then my office. Late at night, not a soul to be heard, but in desperate need of physical relief I faced what Laclau would understand to be the empty signifier of my body. At that moment a cluster of irreducible differences disrupted the usually programmatic and unreflective movements of social interpretation that allow me to move fairly seamlessly and unthoughtfully through space. Things are ready-to-hand usually, to use Heidegger's neologism. But on this night, standing at the doorframe, I find myself disturbed by the play of various kinds of interpretants and their multiple material anchors. I know that this sign, 'Men', is just a conventional sign that has no real existential relation to my urinary tract because I have been habituated to this mode of critical reasoning. Already I am the effect of a social world and its historical sedimentation within me. Even so I react simultaneously as if there were such an existential connection. As I stand there I notice that I am having a feeling and engaged in a hesitation. I notice a slight heating of my cheeks. I notice my muscular system dragging me somewhere other than where my critical reason wishes to take me – my critical reason and my bladder; even my body is not one. A torsion in my guts – a torque, a force – twists and turns me inside out and outside in. This torsion is also the effect of a social world and its historical sedimentation in me. But the ground of sedimentation is not language or its semiotic components. It is semiotic – we might say it is an

energetic interpretation – but not semiological. In other words these sedimentations are neither unified in their semiotic composition, nor in their social direction. What am I to make of these colliding readings of this sign ‘Men’? How do I read these divergent readings? Are the ‘readings’? Even if I do pause to engage in a meta-reading, will this necessarily help me cross this threshold, make alliances with other genders, join my particular, if not peculiar, struggle to some universal horizon?

How would Laclau answer these questions? Perhaps he would say that my attachment to and disturbance by the figure I confronted on the toilet door was not the result of a ‘wealth of signifieds’ but from its nature as a pure signifier through which a quilting function occurs (p. 103). I am like the ‘little boy and a little girl, brother and sister . . . seated in a compartment face to face next to the window through which the buildings along the station platform can be seen passing as the train pulls to a stop. “Look”, says the brother, “we’re at the Ladies!”; “Idiot!” replies his sister, “Can’t you see we’re at Gentlemen”’ (Lacan 1982, p. 152). I refer to an empty signifier on the doorframe to constitute my unity and thus to ‘recognize’ who I am as such. The emptier this signifier is – the purer its nature as a signifier whether as an icon (ç) or linguistic symbol (‘femme’) – the broader its potential reach, the more of ‘me’ there will be. As America is Coke, so Woman/ç is that pure signifier around which the maximal reach of female identity can crystallize. In this model, rhetoric is the figural means by which pure signifiers are knotted together such that metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and catachresis ‘become instruments of an expanded social rationality’ that is essential to ‘ideological interpellation’ (p. 12). In other words, the internal dynamic I experienced when I hesitate at the doorframe is the result of the heterogeneity of the empty signifier within a specific rhetorical operation. In Lacan’s hands, this constitutive *meconnaissance* indicates and is animated by the passion of the signifier, the bar and the slippage between the signifier and the signified on which the truce of subjectivity will rest. Equally certain, with his tongue firmly lodged in his cheek, Lacan sees this passion of the signifier as material.

And so we see that neither Laclau nor Lacan would ever make the mistake of seeing me as standing alone before this doorframe. For them a multiplicity of social discourses course through me at that doorframe knotting together my subjectivity in such a way that I am always also on the verge of unknitting. And while relying on Lacan, Laclau diversifies the structural logic of his symbolic. Laclau knows that every material habitat (context) can be interpreted through multiple names, subject positions and genres. ‘I am that’ is always ‘when am I an instance of *that* and according to what condition of *that* and *me*?’ These (pro)nominal struggles are themselves always within the equally disseminated domain of genre. In what social genre am I engaged – social rebel, ordinary citizen, critique at large, actor on stage – such that *I am that*? How do I align these social genres to practices in such a way that the names of certain subjective positions that I hold dear are preserved? Even if I were wedded to

normative femininity, for instance, I could situate myself within a context and genre that would allow me to cross the threshold of the men's bathroom. For instance, if unexpectedly confronted in the dead of night by one of my colleagues, I can count on the fact that we live in similar enough life-worlds such that my making reference to my body under severe urinary stress trumps the sign of gendered space; i.e. the truth of sex can be sublated to the truth of viscera in certain contexts. 'Look, if you really need to go, then go to the men's bathroom'. And as Laclau would point out, in sublating my sex to my viscera, I find that I can leave my particularity and become part of the general human condition: 'We all got to go' becomes a potential node for the constitution of a people in democratic formations.

For the most part, when political and critical theorists have looked at the readings that allow us to create the matrixes through which we manoeuvre social space, they have emphasized, as does Laclau, name oriented approaches to social life. One problem with these approaches is that they radically reduce the actual dynamics of language-in-use to the single dyad of the signifier and the signified. As countless contemporary language theories have shown these two concepts cannot – and there is no reason they should be expected to – refer and describe the grammatical categories and devices, meta-pragmatic phenomena and processes (including explicit and implicit meta-discursive framing; genre emergence, entextualization and circulation), and institutional canalization that help establish and regiment a relationship between an object (or sign) and sign – in this case between 'me' and 'men' (see for instance, Silverstein and Urban 1996, Povinelli 2001a, 2001b, Agah 2007).

But I want to bracket these pressing concerns to examine a different kind of problem with language-based theories of rhetoric whether or the (post)structuralist or (post)pragmatist variety. I want to bracket these issues to focus on the other modes of rhetoric occurring in and through me as I stand on the threshold of this doorframe. It is my contention that these rhetorical modes are not best understood through the play of the signifier, its purity or pollution, or its enslavement or emancipation from the signified. To isolate analytically these distinct modes of rhetoric we must remember that all acts of interpretation figure a relationship between two other signs (or a sign and an object). The very act of interpretation is an act of rhetorical figuration. My body and the sign attached to the bathroom do not compose a rhetorical figure until an interpretation, or *reading*, establishes some relationship between them. In other words, the rhetorical relationship between the 'Men' guarding the doorframe and me must be established by an additional specific kind of sign, an interpretant. One kind is glossed by 'identity' by which people include all sorts of nominal and nominalizable phenomena, running the gamut between phraseable content such as 'We all have to go' to the 'People'.

The right 'name' is not, however, *necessarily* a sufficient rhetorical structure to get my body through the door. For one thing, the name itself

has a material embodiment. Perhaps the best example of the material embodiment of the linguistic sign can be drawn from music where the scores and words of any composition are perceptually within the perceptual field – the instrumental-technological apparatuses – of their times. For another thing, if the name I read my environment through and the dispositions that resist this name collide, I must change my dispositions by working on them, and not necessarily through a name. My interpretation of my physical interpretation might not be mental at all, it could be another physical interpretation such as vomiting – experiencing myself bodily interpreting my environment in this way sickens me. And so on and so on. Moreover, what is and is not an instance of ‘the body and mind’ or of ‘affect’, ‘muscularity’ or ‘logic’ is itself a history of the assemblage of interpretations rather than hard ontological categories as Peirce suggested. From the point of view of the bodily habitat, one way of reading my ‘reading’ of the bathroom doorframe is as a physical reaction rather than a reading. In social life, most people are constantly producing unconscious embodied readings as they navigate their everyday material and social environments. Bourdieu (1977, 1998) focused exactly on these pre-perceptive corporeal anticipations in his concepts of habitus, investment and field. The good player – the doxic player – does not think, she works her body energetically until she anticipates – her body anticipates – the immanent tendencies of the game. The bad player – the player that resists the game or is not presupposed by the game – does not move so smoothly. You can see her in the crowd. She stands out. She looks confused at various thresholds.

Various modes of interpretation are always already a part of political process. In western democracies the distinction made between deliberative reason and moral sense is a second-order thematization of the broad difference between language-based forms of interpretation and non-language (embodied) forms of interpretation. And on this distinction is built a politics of public reason and its limits in deontological sense. In other political contexts this distinction is used to change political formations. Saba Mahmood (2001, p. 216) can be seen as making this point in her discussion of the practices of piety among Islamic women in Egypt. For Saba what was at stake for these women was ‘the sedimented and cumulative character of reiterated performances, where each performance builds on prior ones, and a carefully calibrated system exists by which differences between reiterations are judged in terms of how successfully (or not) the performance has taken root in the body and mind’.

To move through this doorframe, then, I need to find an interpretant that hinges together the various tokens of types proliferating in front of it even as I am experiencing consciously and unconsciously, bodily as bodily and bodily as mentally, as a sudden overloading, social world as a dense incommensurate set of rhetorical diagrams. The rhetorical consists of multiple modes of materiality and these modes of materiality are always potentially out of alignment. When I

stood before the door, I was not merely the effect of the kind of articulation that interests Laclau – the formal feature of catachresis, synecdoche, metonymy or metaphor – but I was also the effect of the way that these tropes worked through me muscularly, viscerally and affectively. The alternative diagrams of viscera, genitalia, epidermal and class must be aligned rhetorically to allow bodies to traverse doorframes. The rhetorical is in this sense far more complex than a name oriented political theory would allow for. And it is not more complex because more of the same kind of thing is in the picture than name-oriented political theory accounts for. It is more complex because a variety of different kinds of rhetorical materials are always in play; and, although all of these kinds of rhetorical materials are in play in the same material, psychic and social space and time, none of the temporal or spatial dynamics of these rhetorical materials can be ultimately reduced to the same logic or the same social direction. One ‘reading’ pulls me through the door, another away from it, and yet another in neither direction. At this exact moment we experience the slight or not so slight tears that compose everyday life and its hegemonic unity. And these tears are not merely between the *habitus* and the field, but within *habitus* itself. In other words, although Bourdieu describes similar tears as a ‘contradiction’ between the *habitus* and the field, they might also be more of a sliding or slippage.

These tears are not rare, nor are they only available to a select portion of the body politic. Tears exist in the rhetorical fabric of everyday life. We are continually confronted by low-level decisions about what trait ‘allows one to decide if something is a member or not’ (Derrida 1991, p. 228, see also Silverstein and Urban 1996) of a normative interpretation of social space and me. And as my tribute to Derrida suggests, these possible interpretations and their affective and energetic dynamics are always within the play of a multiple deformations and disruptions (demanding environments). If that irritating ‘Men’ is negatively hinged into me, it itself is animated multiply and without security. The non-alignment of the entirety of possible discourses about my body and this sign meets the multiplicity of these possible interpretants as energetic grounds for heaving myself over the threshold. It is not the content of the action that is critical here so much as the dissonance that this content creates across the orders of materiality habituated interpretation and the stance that one takes to this dissonance.

What interests me here is how we conceptualize the rhetorical foundations of the ‘people’ differently when we understand all social movements to be composed of these kinds of rhetorical tears in our normative epistemologies and dispositifs. Why for instance do some people move towards these decompositional tears while others run to re-suture them? How do we increase the likelihood of facing such tears politically in our ordinary lives? Why do we experience ‘gut’ reactions as some form of truth – the truth of our moral sense or of our discipline? Here the later writings of Foucault find their place.

In his 'What is Enlightenment', Foucault (1984) transforms Kant's limit-philosophy into a positive sociology.

If the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory what place is occupied by whatever is singular contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints. . . . This critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.

As Foucault well knew, these possibilities come not merely from linguistic-epistemological knowledge but disciplines of the body and their tactics. For Foucault, s/m sexual practices were exemplary of the possibilities that could emerge from pursuing rather than avoiding these tears. But so can the practice of peeing.

To understand why we move towards or away from tears we need to remember three things: First, all acts of interpretation, whether affective, energetic or symbolic, can be experienced as adding something to the scene that wasn't there before or discovering something in the scene that had been hidden. This is simply because the interpretant does indeed add something: an additional sign connecting two other signs. This addition can be thematized in all sorts of ways – telos, truth, destiny or God. Second, a tear can *be* existentially, but the attitude, policy or posture adopted in relation to a tear is not in the nature of the tear. In other words, at once and the same time, people experience the non-correspondence of these diagrams and environments, evaluate them on the basis of competing modes of evidence and authority, express and ascribe emotional states to them, evaluate how normative institutions will treat them, and align themselves or not with others to form more or less cohesive social groups. Tears *can be* incitements to act differently. They *can be* invitations to freedom in Foucault's sense of freedom. But they can also be something to be avoided or disciplined. Because of this issue of stance is extraordinarily important to politics and its normative and counter-normative projects. One stance to the tear that opens between habituated and disturbed mental and physical interpretants may be to pursue an identity or to bracket identity and instead twist my guts into a new body without organs. Another stance might move me away from such articulations. Finally, which stance we take on the meaning and destiny of these moments of interpretive disturbance cannot be separated out of the institutionally organized environments in which we live.



Let me turn to a second doorframe To develop these points and suggest how they might refashion our approach to the rhetoric of the people in actually existing liberal democracies.

#### 4.

In a day in the not so recent past, a group of white nurses and some members of an indigenous family clustered on the concrete porch of a house in which a sixty-six year old woman was dying of oral cancer. Inside the cinder brick house were a series of rooms, unfurnished except for mattresses on the floor, a single steel-framed bed in the front room (what most Australians would call the den), and a wobbly table on which stood a broken television set. In the kitchen were carcasses of various animals and fish, opened jams, loaves of bread, sugar, tea, bowls and pans with days old remainders of cooked food and running through them all various sizes of cockroaches. The inside toilet had been backed up for weeks. There was no hot water. Sewn through all of this were the syringes, empty pill bottles, new and used bandages used to care for this woman, and beer cans, wine coolers and other addictive substances her relatives were using as they stayed there. The nurses on the porch had come to change the bandages of the dying woman. Many people on the porch were drunk, stoned or hung over. Not far distant, a fight had broken out between the two sides of the community, part of a longstanding 'war'.

On this particular day, one of the nurses entered the house to administer medications and change the bandage of the dying woman. As the nurse did so a middle aged slightly inebriated indigenous woman also entered the house to cry for her mother – the dying woman had been married to her father's brother. Both of these men had died of strokes long ago. As the daughter began to cry and beat her head, the nurse insisted she leave, saying that only family members were allowed to be present when the bandages were being changed. A fight broke out between them. The daughter confronted the nurse's assumptions about bodies and their substantial connections saying that her body felt her mother's pain, not sympathetically, but actually. In this physical mutuality she and her mother were 'one body'. Her pain was the interpretant that made this body one not the patrilineal name of the fathers. She then threatened the nurse with physical harm if she tried to kick her out. Others rushed to intervene, including myself. The confrontation was defused. But it resurfaced throughout the woman's illness as nurses, operating under the best of intentions to shield this woman's privacy, given the horrible physical condition of her illness, would or could not make way for this form of embodied relationship. Eventually, after making a complaint about the high level of violence and physical threat on the community, the nurse walked off

her job. Soon after the local nurses union voted to boycott the community unless it could guarantee the safety of its health workers.

On other days, non-indigenous bodies stay firmly on one side of the door, or if they pass through it, quickly exit. Some sit outside for reasons of politeness. Others are physically or emotionally uncomfortable in the physical scene they encounter inside. They describe their experience within the genre of panic. 'I can't go in there. It makes me panic'. For them the issue is not whether under the right conditions they could act – repeated exposure or a better understanding. There are no possible conditions in which they can be there and still be. The material nature of the scene would have to change dramatically before they could 'stand it'. Some critically reflect on these physical and emotional reactions. They see this doorframe as a material metaphor that provides a critical reading of trickle down economics and neo-liberal attacks on the welfare state. They interpret their physical and emotion reactions as demonstrating self-evidently the intolerable nature of neo-liberalism – they experience the scene as physically and emotionally intolerable and interpret these interpretants not as interpretants but as a moral truth about the limits of life at the end of the market liberalization. Some don't express any reaction verbally. Or, not having a critique of market liberalization, they blame local people for not accepting the minimal responsibility of caring for their sick relatives. These people also experience the scene as physically and emotionally intolerable but interpret these interpretants within a different moral genre. Some indigenous friends of mine notice these reactions, comment on them critically or sympathetically; others don't notice or don't care. In any case these everyday modal philosophies of the embodied interpretation can turn deontological. They can become about obligation, responsibility and blame. Who or what is responsible for this place and my reaction to it? To whom is something owed and under what conditions? In other words, the embodied interpretants of embodied space can themselves be interpreted as moral sense – moral senses.

I think it is safe to claim at this point that everyone who stood before this doorframe found themselves interpreting their social environment through the full range of rhetoric material discussed in the previous section. They did not understand these rhetorical figurations in the same way. The daughter of the dying woman understood an energetic-affective interpretant of her mother's condition as a sign of the truthfulness of her kinship to her. The nurses read this reaction as a sign of her lack of care. A full range of secondary interpretations emerged among health and social workers about how to interpret the disjunction between one's commitment to indigenous lifeworlds and the discovery that their actual lifeworlds can make them sick. What stance on this disjunction was appropriate and productive? And everyone, indigenous and non-indigenous, read these interpretants as indicating some truth. The problem was with competing truths both within any social subject and their

social world and between social subjects and their social worlds. How are these resolved into political worlds, actions and subjects within liberal democracies?

It is here that we must remember that the meaning and destiny of these moments of interpretive disturbance cannot be separated out of the institutionally organized environments in which we live. All of these material grounds of interpreting social life and of interpreting ones various grounds of interpretation – for instance, ‘I am ashamed that I feel sick when I enter to homes of others’ – occur within social institutions that amplify, impede or deflect one possible reading or another. These momentary tears, these singular events of everyday interpretation, meet social machines of interpretive augmentation and deflection. The ability of nurses to strike – to give their reading of their environment social and political force – and to have the strike recognized by their union – no matter whether the nurses were right or wrong – intensified the interpretive hold and reach of their mode-of-life. These social institutions made it harder for local people to make sense or to make other people’s senses interpret the world otherwise. If want to understand body politic beyond the outrages of the community and the outrageousness of poverty and its management, then the question is how these variously grounded interpretations that are constantly judging various phenomenological orders are socially amplified or not.

The stakes of understanding this is high in indigenous Australia. Some indigenous and non-indigenous policy pundits argue – in the wake of liberal forms of multiculturalism’s failure to equalize structures of racial inequality – that the singular largest problem with addressing the fetid nature of these communities is that indigenous Australians are so destroyed and so used to their destitution that it is unclear how to fix their life-worlds other than removing them from them. Given the high rate of substance abuse and other behavioural problems that suggest indigenous people are themselves not invested in maintaining their lives, these people and their worlds are not worth the investment. In other words, even as I, and many others, have been critically analyzing state forms of cultural recognition, state actors and many people within the national public seem to have shifted dramatically away from the politics of recognition. Noel Pearson (1999), an Aboriginal activist, has famously and forcefully argued that state welfare, when applied to indigenous peoples, is a technique of numbing indigenous and non-indigenous people to the radical ‘state of dysfunction’ in Aboriginal communities. After over a decade of the Liberal-National coalition government under John Howard, it is not clear whether the Australian state has any real commitment to the politics of cultural recognition or the broad imaginary of social justice that underpinned it. The conservative government under John Howard is committed to withdrawing federal economic support from rural indigenous communities as part of the ‘mainstreaming’ of indigenous people and policy. The certainty with which the nurses could act and expect to be supported in their action – again whether from one position or another they were correct – was itself an interpretant of

this changed socio-political field. The effort to materially ground an alternative reading of corporeal kinship, make alliances with others, and join this particular struggle to a universal horizon is that much more difficult.

## 5.

What we see in scenes such as this one are at least threefold. First, in social life there are often two or more competing rhetorical formations of any social movement, sometimes within the same social subject and her social world sometimes between social subjects and their social worlds. Where the body is, what constitutes a real or a legitimate affect, and whether legible affects and reactions are legible for some and not others are always part of the rhetorically sedimented social world out of which the body politic emerges. In the second case, suffering has a certain distribution and meaning in so far as it is differentially experienced by differentially situated people. The daughter of the dying woman was furious that the nursing staff could not see the clear bodily evidence of her bodily relation to her mother. For many nurses – and other visitors – the seeming inability of local indigenous people to *feel* the horror in which they are living let alone act to ameliorate this horror demands an accounting, usually a moral accounting, usually by indigenous people themselves. Second, these rhetorical assemblages are not reducible to a name-oriented political or social theory. Many progressive activists have described with great pathos their shame, and their political undoing, when discovering that they cannot ‘get their body under control’ in scenes of poverty where poverty manifests as intense filth. It doesn’t matter how they characterize this bodily liquefaction; they still liquefy. Finally, the institutional backing of one form of embodied sense – its names, its moral senses and classificatory trajectory – provide a intensified rhetorical force, a sedimentation, within which alternative backing must struggle.

In short, to understand how a body politic is conjured, mobilized, and presupposed in political struggles to hegemonize the social field, we need an account of the nature of the rhetorical that does not start with the play of the signifier, its purity or pollution, its enslavement or emancipation from the signified. The model we need begins with a different series of questions: How are two or more signs hinged together through the practices and processes of interpretation (what De Man referred to as doing a reading)? What are the various material grounds of practices and processes of interpretation? And how are these interpretative grounds the material conditions that animate, exceed or oppose the legitimacy of social norms and institutions? Rather than merely *logos* and *phonos*, and rather than merely the rhetorical architecture of the empty signifier, the political subject is the effect of multiply grounded interpretants hinging together the various already existing energetic diagrams, physicalities

and meanings that compose social space as such. As we stand before various doorframes the entire materially diverse panoply of interpretation is at play including social institutions and forces that compose these scenes. Interpretants address meet, order, and deform a multitude of material anchors even as they *enflesh* worlds, depend on previous *enfleshments* of the world, and apprehend these enfleshments both in the sense of the ability of these discourses to grasp the importance, significance or meaning of this flesh and in the sense of the ability of these discourses to create a feeling of anxiety or excitement that something dangerous or unpleasant might happen in the vicinity of this flesh.

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