

Published in the journal *Enculturation*, Responses, March 2020.

**Toward Plural Forms of Rhetorical Identification:
On Positive Vulnerability and the Rhetorical Unseen**

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I cry most often in the shower. The car is a good place to let it flow too, but you never know who is going to pull up next to you at the stoplight. There you are—face beat red, blubbering like a baby—and then you look over: Oh Jesus, it's Shirley from Human Resources. She turns away, pretends not to see you, after obviously seeing you. An hour later, over bad coffee and stale muffins, you lie and decide to tell her that a classic Bon Jovi song always blindsides you—hits you right in the heart—but the truth is that you just took a phone call from your mother: Terrible family news.

For those who share a home and have the privilege of a bathroom that is far enough away from common areas to feel secure and secluded, the shower is a fantastic place for a good sob. If I am ever crying in the car, unlike in the shower, it is a sudden and momentary expression. More than likely, a heart-wrenching National Public Radio story is to blame. I get all wrapped up in one man's tireless dedication to saving an endangered species, fighting against all odds, only to discover that the whole family of elephants was slaughtered overnight by those fucking poachers—except one tiny baby elephant with a broken leg hiding in the bushes that the man then nurses back to health; they become best friends. Or maybe it's the story of the soft-hearted kid with terminal brain cancer telling us in a sweet, frail voice how he got to play basketball with a real NBA star and wave to the crowd before the big playoff game. He's a super-fan and wears the team jersey in his hospital bed. We pick up the story from his mother's perspective as we round 2nd Avenue and pull into the McDonalds drive-through. We hear about the family's terrible struggles, feel that we are sitting right there in the living room, and suddenly burst into tears—"Welcome to McDonalds, may I take your order?"

Having a rush of feelings for strangers results from an identification of some kind or another: the basic recognition that we are essentially the same, unified in our suffering, tied together in this world. Foregrounding the persuasive power of identification, Kenneth Burke makes that term the centerpiece of rhetoric. He stages identification as the primary means of "inducing cooperation," a way of appearing the same in "speech, gesture, tonality, order, attitude, idea" (*A Rhetoric* 55). From Burke's perspective, we can confidently say that a good story with true sadness should make us cry; if we do not cry, the narrator is doing something wrong. Brian Crable describes identification as the manner of "bridging a distance" with others (213). NPR knows how to do this in the space of one minute. Diane Davis argues that identification is better conceptualized as an already preexisting, internal disposition, like an automatic unconscious unity with others, prior to the divisions of signification; unfortunately, that deep interconnectedness continually needs to be rebridged after being broken by symbolical experiences (124-126). But which kind of bridging are we talking about across these diverse cases?

Is crying over a baby elephant the same as crying for the kid with cancer? And what about that phone call from Mom? I am reminded of Lawrence Grossberg, who once said that affect is too often deployed as a "magical term" such that appeals to it as a vague bodily force or intensity keep

scholars from doing "the harder work of specifying modalities and apparatuses" (315). The same seems to be the case, and has been for a much longer time now, with rhetoricians deploying that all-encompassing term "identification."

Of course, identification is also a mega-scale transformation of the field of rhetoric itself. It signals a transition to the "new rhetoric," away from a classical focus on "persuasion" (Day 270). Identification marks a step toward thinking about the formation of identities and embodied experiences. Identification shifts away from rhetoric taught exclusively as a pedagogy of formalisms for argumentation and allows Burke to present a dramaturgical view of everyday life (Sinha and Jackson). For this reason, the term identification, we can argue, remains broad-sweeping and rightly so. It is, after all, a signpost for the field and a way of looking as much as any discrete rhetorical maneuver. But at some point, the term becomes overused—precision disappears. Terms can grow muddy over time, like a headlamp so regularly taken down into the coal mines that the miner wearing it can't see the way anymore for all of the collected dust.

At present, there are 834 results when using the search term "identification" to find articles in Rhetoric Society Quarterly [RSQ]. [Take a look](#). This is some feat given that the journal has only published less than one quarter of that number of articles since it was even called RSQ in 1976 (with only a handful of newsletters prior to that time). Reviewing those articles reveals the flexibility of the term.

One of my favorite articles argues that the construction of likemindedness or compulsion to see each other as "the same" must be continually maintained for it to be effective over the long run (Belk). Another suggests that identification can be created in a way that it is applied to whole people groups (Dougherty). Another says that identification is a way to establish contrast and creates outsider groups: i.e. it functions to isolate a subset or construct an enemy (Desilet and Appel). More recently, identification has been described as a personal feeling of proximity to something like the characterizations of a particular medical condition such that we feel that we are obsessive-compulsives (Rothfelder and Johnson Thornton). This is to say, identification is a flexible rhetorical vehicle, and if it has conceptual bounds, then it nevertheless seems applicable as a description of many different rhetorical moves. It can encompass as many or as few people as needed, and it can be turned inward or individualized.

Most often identification is, as Burke says, a linguistic strategy of a rhetor, but it can have a wide or narrow range. It can manifest as a recognition of class, ethnicity, or nationality, as Maurice Charland shows in his examination of the declaration of the "Peuple Québécois" (133). Or it can operate in a more conceptually fluid and temporal way, as in the presentation of a type of "urban creative" or a "bad mom," which one might adopt as a self-description for but a brief season. Accordingly, identification's action or function can also be wide or narrow; it can lead to temporary alterations of behaviors (like voting for a political candidate at the last minute), it can alter beliefs (like thinking that all environmental activists are valiant or despicable), or it might generate altered psychological states (like the embodied feeling of seeing one's self as suppressed and ultimately defined by a socially stigmatized disorder). In fact, to be a suasive force, identification needs no subject-driven rhetor at all, as people presumably self-create identities by making their own identifications with circulating signifiers in mishmash fashion. A man on a flight playing a memory game on his mobile phone recently told me that he was a "brain-gamer"; I said, "Is that a term?" He said, "No, I made it up." Put simply, answering the question "which identification?" exposes an underlying diversity in identification. When we say, "I feel emotional," we are then tempted to ask, "Well, which emotion do you feel?" Why would it be any different

with identification—which we should remember is not an emotion but, at best, a term describing a realization or state of embodied being—when applied in a specific kind of way?

The plural of identification can be cajoled out of the dark by asking questions of the research reviewed above: What is being maintained, exactly, when identification needs to be maintained? What is abstracted or transformed into a feeling of identification when identification supposedly unites the people? Is this feeling different than the one made when viewing enemies created through contrast with opposing "identifications"? Are these examples as powerfully composed as the internal personal feelings that we make when adopting a medical descriptor like OCD? Is it reasonable to imply that this diagnostic identification is at all the same as a political one? Likewise, do we presume that feeling a "bridged distance" with the park ranger, the injured elephant, the kid with cancer, or our own mother are equivalent enough to be labelled "identification" and to cite Burke? The term identification cannot be expected to do so much work.



Fig. 1. Picture from "8-Year-Old Warriors Fan with Leukemia Passes Away." ABC7News, 1 May 2017.
<https://abc7news.com/sports/8-year-old-warriors-fan-with-leukemia-passes-away/1942077/>.



Fig 2. Picture from "Poachers Kill 300 Zimbabwe Elephants with Cyanide." *Telegraph.co.uk*, 20 Oct. 2013. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/zimbabwe/10390634/Poachers-kill-300-Zimbabwe-elephants-with-cyanide.html>.



Fig. 3 Picture from "Man with Down Syndrome Covers Dad with Kisses in Sweet Airport Reunion." *People*, 23 Aug. 2018. <https://people.com/human-interest/man-down-syndrome-covers-dad-in-kisses/>.

This breaks to a larger point: Rhetoric itself cannot be so unified, so singular. Rhetoric cannot be a matter of maneuvers with an essence that can be boiled down—elegant in form/ation, neatly encapsulated within the loveliness of a grand unifying theory. And if rhetoric can, then its construction of identification is the equivalent of a plastic anatomical model. The body lives in active, juicy, often untamed and strange, chemical and electrical transformations.

In a Burkean sense, it seems immediately fair to say that identification was meant as the covert operation happening within all possible formations of a persuasive moment for humans; identification is, after all, a kind of "nature-of" explanatory claim about how we move along together in this world. The term captures a big idea: that any human outreach emerges from a psychological drive for, or need for, cooperation. Thus, identification is necessarily mixed within divergent expressions of ethos, logos, and pathos. That is to say, for Burke, identification never was meant to be specific. Indeed, when instances are subject to phenomenological inquiry, the idea appears not specific at all. In scope, intensity, tenor, and directedness, each identification discussed so far in this paper is in some obvious, embodied way quite different. That noted, nobody doubts that rhetorical scholars do tell us, usually in some specific terms, what they see when they see an identification in a particular social situation. Yet, each invocation of identification is like a universe labelled "universe," and each is capacitated differently just as it has different outcomes.

Thinking through the rhetorical appeals and positionings that stir me to drive 500 miles to help my sister is an entirely separate matter from how it is that I start to cry for a park ranger saving elephants. Each may have qualities worth teasing out; each also may well be a mode of identification more common to a particular kind of social situation than another. Taking an interior view, or the rumination of experiences of "identifying," it seems reasonable to suggest that making rhetorical identification plural and theorizing specific forms will be valuable for rhetorical theory and criticism. This, of course, is the smaller claim, or what I see as another call for conceptual diversity in rhetoric, following in the same new materialist vein as Thomas Rickert's call not to see rhetoric so often in terms of subject-driven rhetorical situations and Nathan Stormer's call to see rhetorical events as distributed and mutable. These calls push toward greater awareness of bodies and pursue terminological expansion. But abandoning the domination of identification suggests the need for a broader disruption for a field so unrelentingly reliant on this one foundation.

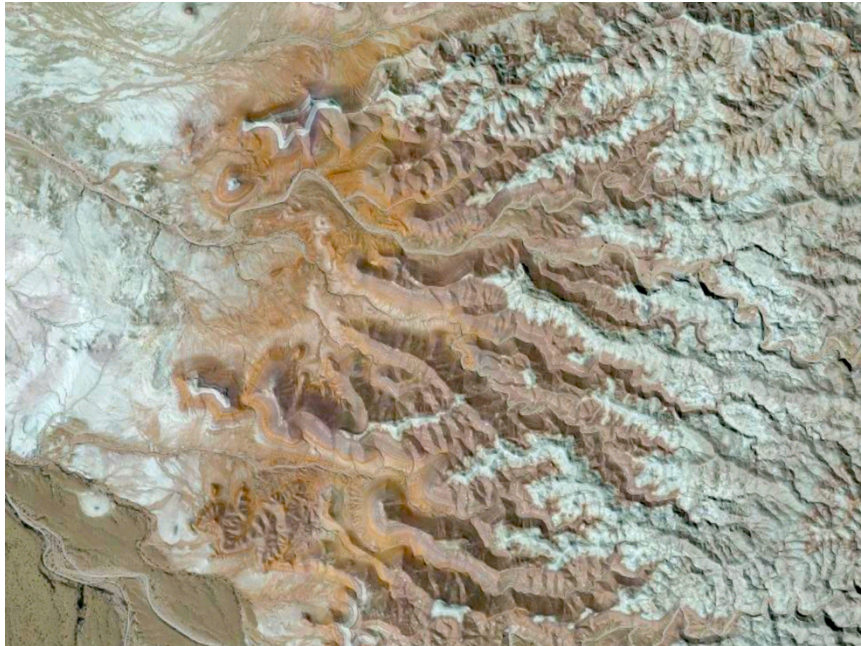


Fig. 4. Picture from "Arizona Desert," *Google Earth*, <https://earth.google.com/web/@35.85617763,-111.33326426,1309.3783779a,3224.35340372d,35y,-0h,0t,0r>.

The seismicity of making identification plural—and, thus, undermining the conceptual unification of rhetoric as such—can be made more evident when noticing how Rickert and Stormer, despite offering highly valuable and important critiques, both still operate within the paradigm of identification. Their cases are coming-togethers of various material, or we might say aesthetic, relations of humans and nonhuman things acting within—as well as below and before the consciousness of—bodies living amid community discourses and confronting defined discursive appeals in a specific time and place. Put another way, if people change course, then the workings of the interface or the acrid smell of burning tires in the air might be reasons, as they suggest; but are these not identifications made into nonhuman compatibilities or susceptibilities? I wonder if Burke's well-wrought "inducement of cooperation" could ever be displaced from the underlying unity of rhetoric being about sharing in common (i.e. interest uniting), about a force that draws together. Can rhetoric also diversify here and be about more than integrations, matches, co-formations, or things that come together?

If this is possible, and I am not entirely convinced myself, then I think it must become more than a dyad: identification-repulsion (although repulsion as a basis for rhetoric as a suasive motion would be a different kind of start). Perhaps we can allow identification to slither out onto a muddy bank and evolve in a thousand directions without a conceptual guide. Maybe then rhetoric could be shaken to its identification core and realize the ineffable passing of time, the undetected surge of radioactivity sweeping over a landscape, the ripping of epithelial skin, the elevated CO₂ at a bus stop, the sensation of the Holy Ghost, the insensible and unintelligibility of a moment, the unbridgeable distance that nevertheless activates a motion and initiates—or should we here sometimes say generates—action. Could the rhetorical be always obtuse and indefinite and, in so being, eliminate a constant of rhetoricity?

Of course it can, but what would we, as rhetorical scholars, do? We must press on with the detectable; we must analyze and make discriminations; we must do what we can to identify the root of oppression and subjugation; no one disagrees. But can this include also separation not

born of some identification? I am thinking here of the independence of the materiality of subjects and objects and how they do not necessarily have very good access to each other, as Quentin Meillassoux suggests. I am also thinking of the inaccessible core of an object proposed by Graham Harman in his conception of "Object-Oriented Ontologies." I am thinking of dark matter forces, of the elusive, of a rhetoric within the beyond-us and beyond identifications we see and feel.



Fig. 5. Picture from "The Universe, A Universe of NASA Resources," *StarNet*, 6 June, 2018.
<https://www.starnetlibraries.org/event/a-universe-of-nasa-resources/>.

But now I already risk a terrible divergence. The big argument that rhetorical identification in a Burkean sense is a mythology of human action and a dominating paradigm is not primarily what I set out to prove here, even though I just crammed it in. I, rather, wanted in this piece to consider what appears amid "identifications" when thinking rhetoric out from a body. If rhetoric is essentially a complex human-nonhuman entanglement of many bodies and affects, then there seems to be an injustice in labelling yet another identification. In the same way that we do not title our papers "Metaphor in Political Argument" but find it more exacting to say "Metaphors of X type in Y's political argument," so too are we probably going to be able to unpack the valences and vibrancies of identification if we follow the trail of identification a little further down the road of embodiment. So, the "smaller" argument does not wave goodbye to identification just yet but seeks for it better articulation through phenomenological reflection.

Lisa Meloncon sets out an argument in support of phenomenological reflection in rhetorical inquiry, which proves valuable here. She notes that, as rhetoricians, "we tacitly agreed to the supposition that we carry the responsibility of ensuring that their [our subjects'] experiences are accurately represented" (97). Doing this well, she asserts, means that rhetorical scholars need to give more focused attention to spaces, materialities, and affects. Phenomenological experience, then, is one way to embrace new materialisms and find means to study how things come together across symbols and bodies in localized ambient environments [1]. Striving for "accurate representations" necessitates specificity and a focus on the feeling of lived realities, which are often not captured in audio recordings or textual accounts (Meloncon 97-98).

In brief, Meloncon encourages rhetorical scholars to think cases through their own experiences and to try to experience the situations of others.

Reflecting phenomenologically on various examples of identification proves useful for initiating some questions about the present terminological opaqueness of rhetorical identification. Imagine, for instance, the last time that you needed to seriously discuss a difficult topic with a sibling or other family member; consider trying to generate useful and caring discussion about your sibling's possibly abusive husband or maybe a drinking problem the family is whispering about behind the person's back. "Inducing cooperation," as Burke says, to enter into such a conversation in a productive way that can break the family facade often requires being vulnerable first. When it works, it works. And that kind of positive vulnerability wherein someone says something carefully and self-reflectively emotional—powerful, personal, and pertinent to the moment and the case at hand—can throw open the flood gates. That form of rhetorical identification is unlike other kinds. Bill Clinton famously sold his Southern "good ol' boy" persona to his political advantage while yet being able to mingle with the elites (see Jones). In like manner, Dwight D. Eisenhower crafted identifications with the people as a "simple man" who nevertheless exerted powerful leadership by saying profound things about America in a "plain style" (Crable, "Ike" 190). But those are other kinds of identifications. Different too is crying in the car for a stranger who supports a son as he is dying of cancer; phenomenologically, that case has its own mechanisms and radio-specific ways of "bridging the distance" with the listening audience. Hearing a mother cry for her son and gasp to catch a breath of air amid a sob as she tries to hold it together on the radio is as much about identifying with her as a parent as that gasp. Hearing Bill Clinton say "ya'll" is not a comparison case, even though, of course, that too is an identification.

Here is where we can circle back to the shower...

Thinking about why people might cry in the shower helps pinpoint an internal disposition that I will call "positive vulnerability," which I hope to situate as one type or performative mode of identification. The vulnerability that the shower induces might teach us something about some instances of identification; here, I argue, we have a case for phenomenological reflection on the pluralism of identification that can also show how rhetorical means for forging identifications are likely to be, to some extent, socially patterned. Said differently: Why we cry in the shower can tell us something phenomenologically about why an expression of one's own vulnerability might, in the first place, prove so productive for "inducing cooperation" during situations when needing to raise difficult topics, especially with those we love and desire to help.

To examine the case, I will simply consider what it is about the shower that encourages emotional upwelling. Thinking from experience, I can say that crying in the shower happens for the following reasons: First, I have privacy from eyes of others to hide the sight of the crying. Second, I have the needed privacy from the ears of others to hide the sounds of the crying. Third, I can guess that the experience of nakedness in the shower might contribute to some internal sense of being exposed or create a total loss of pretense and an increased embodied feeling of solitude or aloneness that makes me embrace my own vulnerability. Fourth, the water pouring down keeps me from feeling uncomfortable with the sensation of tears streaming down the face. Fifth, the opportunity to prepare myself for suitable social appearance afterwards—such as drying off the face, blowing the nose, and fixing the hair—allows me to exit the room, get-on with life, and pretend that all is normal if I wish. Sixth, the total lack of distraction due to the absence of media offers the opportunity for self-reflection. Finally, the atmosphere of the shower environment—

including the enclosed room, the sound of falling water, and the steam—creates a calming atmosphere and sense of ease.

In such an ambient space, it is hard to resist reflective thinking. In the shower, we mull the day or dwell on particular points of conversations. Sometimes we even devise strategies for starting over once we exit the bathroom. The bathroom becomes a little recuperation tank, a haven. It is a place where reality can be rebooted. We condense down the space of what needs attending, and there we finally find the time for peace, we escape the demands of partners and children, and we exist absent the social impositions of text messages and email updates. We linger in the bathroom for precisely these reasons. Or maybe we're crying.

I want to suggest that this kind of vulnerability—which we have most of the time only with ourselves when we are separated from others' judgmental tendencies and demands—is similar to the emotional release that can happen to others when we show ourselves to be in real emotional need also, and then, like a deluge, a sibling or spouse falls into our arms and sobs about a tragic experience or a hidden problem. Getting to that point often requires that they see themselves reflected first in the mirror of the interlocutor's face. The emotional exposure of one's own life is a risk set out before another in order to break existing conditions and provide the other person with some security for their own exposure; doing so can instigate a release of raw, often socially taboo, communication from another; and it may require a space of comfort and privacy: This is positive vulnerability. If crying in the shower represents, at least sometimes, what we long to do with others whom we hope will embrace us when we do, then positive vulnerability, as I conceptualize it, is an unexpected pathos, the rhetorical risk of the interlocutor—the family member, friend, or even the stranger—who makes the first move to say: It's OK, I am like you, I feel awful a lot too, I want to support you because I too need support.

Richard Marback writes on vulnerability in his essay on rhetoric's own disciplinary vulnerability, as scholars seek to overcome the simplistic idea that any rhetoric is "mere rhetoric" while also resisting the totalizing power of rhetorical appeals. In sharing how rhetorical scholars see vulnerability in both directions, he argues that being vulnerable is often equated to being weak. To be vulnerable means taking on the risk of opening one's self to being "duped"; within this thought pattern, "vulnerability constrains openness" (4). But "it is necessary to develop a richer sense of vulnerability itself" so that it extends openness and pushes inquiry further (6). He goes on:

When we are vulnerable to the appeals of others, we cannot so easily withdraw our susceptibility; perhaps we cannot ever really withdraw it at all. To accept our vulnerability is to accept less rational control and more emotional involvement . . . Yet we can find ourselves vulnerable to the appeals of others in ways we would not want to characterize as weaknesses. We can instead find ourselves susceptible to the appeals of others in ways that we would characterize as strengths of character, as more integral to our senses of who we are, as when we find ourselves willing to believe a loved one despite suspicions to the contrary . . . A loyal lover and a victim's forgiving family are making themselves vulnerable in the acts of believing and reconciling, but their doing so is not inherently a weakness. (Marback 7-8)

Taking identification as a master trope for the state of the field of rhetoric does not require rhetoricians to take it as a master term for describing localized and socially situated events where people come together or enter into a realization of shared interests. In fact, the diagnostic identification made by people adopting the term OCD, as Rothfelder and Johnson Thornton describe, is worth singling out not as identification but rather as a specific kind of identification—one internal, crafted from personal "proximity" to what were otherwise presented as recurring negative traits and affects; these are distinct from the ethnocultural performances of politics, such as Bill Clinton's Southern slang drawn out at just the right moment at the local Alabama diner (Jones). Ronald Carpenter almost moves in this direction when showing that identification in a rhetorical performance can happen through mannerisms or styles, not only through "lexical matters," yet the presumption of singularity to identification itself, as an embodied mode, remains undisturbed.

In brief: We must ask what is lost and at stake when we do not see these instances as worthy of new names or as much different—and not only different in the delivery but also in the flesh. If rhetoric exists, then it is neither on paper nor on the screen; rather, it is alive in us at the same time as across environments radically alien from us and divided from any touchability. The examples provided here may be, in a broad sense, Burkean identifications, but when phrased in that way, they are also conveniences.

At some level, not naming the specificity hides important interior nuances even when the scholar offers a detailed description of the case. The default mechanism of "rhetorical identification" forgets the multiplicity of sociality and variability of bodily materiality. And as suggested earlier in this essay, it may also forget what is not coming together, meeting, unifying, bridged, or able to be bridged. Even if we can resist relegating all that is not witnessable, describable, or tangible to non-scholarship, those weird things nevertheless crawl their way through the critic's objects and feel their way into the critic's bodily sensations; a gaping incomprehensibility must also be inherent to any groundings of rhetoric.

A Conclusion

Cases of identification are more or less personal, rational, affective, cognitive, tied to place, and engaged with stereotype, routine, tradition, or taboo. They appear through different kinds of appeals and take place in different social encounters having often targeted social actions (See: Miller, "Genre"). Accordingly, the identification that happens because of an expression of personal vulnerability occurs only in specific kinds of encounters, is dependent upon breaking a taboo, and enacts a social exposure just as it aims for a tumultuous result and more often than not forever alters terms of engagement. The "identification" in any given case of positive vulnerability is what might be called an upwelling of feeling, a unity of psychological frailties in a moment that overruns the rational demands of social pretenses. If positive vulnerability generates a case of rhetorical identification, then it does not feel precisely like the one that Burke (*A Rhetoric*), Crabel ("Ike"), Jones, Desilet and Appel, Belk, or Dougherty describe. But the better point may be that we can never describe these rhetorical events, not one, not all. To go further, identification may only arise in the realm of what is visible and may not be agentive or primary. Rhetoric need not remain tied to identification, and the rhetorician's result need not be the flat demarcation of an identification.

We can now smear a sticky black brushstroke of paint across the crisp white page of Burke's proclamation and darken—make the unimaginable part of the picture—a rhetorical

commonplace: Rhetoric ever conceals as much as it reveals, but there is more: Inside of every revelation lies a much bigger secret [2]. And nobody will ever describe it.

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[1] For discussion of new materialism and ambient environments, see: Rickert.

[2] Burke discusses this in the passage on terministic screens; see *Language as Symbolic Action*, 45; however, Carolyn Miller discusses this idea in her work also. See:

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