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Rickert's Historical Materialism: The Entangled Hierarchy of Identity and Rhetoricity

Last week, while reading Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," I stumbled across this line: "The Greeks invented rhetoric to gain power over their audiences" (1170). It was not only a brazen claim but also a fascinating concept; to assert that rhetoric was, or can be, intentionally crafted as a means to exclude others and establish a social hierarchy. However, Nietzsche actually might have been on to something. In Rickert's article, "Rhetorical Prehistory and the Paleolithic," he takes note of the same phenomenon, but expands upon it:

Rhetorical history and theory has begun to emphasize embodied, situated performance beyond intellectualization, however, and this essay joins with those efforts and seeks to further them. The notion of entanglement I propose here has a distinct bottom-up character, in line with theories of nonlinear emergence. Thus, I argue that rhetorics take cultural form through being an emergent likelihood given certain conditions (for instance, social complexity, hierarchy, division, transcendence of immediacy, and conflict), and these conditions are sedimented not solely in cultural narrative, ritual, and practice, but in how they are made, accumulated, and enacted in (or through) material forms (354)

In other words, the manner by which rhetoric manifests itself in a certain time and space is relative to, and tangled up with, whatever those environmental conditions might be. Therefore, Rickert suggests that rhetoric engages in a kind of historical materialism, a model that investigates how rhetoric has been demonstrated in a certain form; why it has been continuously reproduced and repurposed; and to what extent cultural interactions have had on its production and function. Rhetoric is constantly formed and reformed as a gradual coalescence of historical and evolutionary factors—

this includes social structures of superiority such as hierarchies of race and gender, which are manifested materially as physical identities. Identity and rhetoricity are essential to one another, then, because they are inextricably linked to the same dynamic social, cultural, and historical circumstances. As we've seen in some of the readings from this semester—particularly in those from the nineteenth century—being black, or being a woman, cannot be distanced from the rhetorical effect of an author and the ethos of their work. I suspect that as we move closer to contemporary times in this course we'll encounter a more diverse portfolio of writing, but clearly the world of rhetoric at this time was dominated by and defined by the white male establishment. Frederick Douglass and Phoebe Palmer (the authors I will consider in this elaboration), as well as others that we've read thus far illuminate the existence of a resistance to the hierarchical nature of rhetoric described by Rickert. These voices existed, yes, but they still fell victim to objectification by the white patriarchy—literally Douglass and Palmer became tools and channels for rhetoric instead of acting as so-called legitimate authors/orators/rhetoricians in themselves; their very identity invalidated them.

This tension between identity and rhetoric exists plainly in the case of Frederick Douglass, as written in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: “[His] success as a speaker led audiences to doubt that he had ever been a slave, or contrariwise, to doubt that he spoke his own words—instead they accused him of having some white ghost writer prepare his speeches” (1063). I wondered in an annotation: “What sort of rhetorical implications does this have regarding the relationship between ethos and medium for the author and their audience?” To which **kpolizzi** replied: “What we see here is evidence that somehow Douglass has lost credibility due to his body, and his oral articulation of his self. He tries to recoup that credibility via the written word (which

places a material layer between Douglass and the reader, preventing them from seeing his body), but we have seen in other texts that women were unable to establish authority via the written word. We know they struggled to establish this ethos because it was apparently necessary to have testimony from men prefacing their writing, to establish that they are worthy of notice.” As kpolizzi points out, Douglass’ physical appearance was inextricably linked to his identity, and therefore and limited his rhetorical capacity. His body couldn’t contain a legitimate, independent, rhetorical agent because the limitations of the social hierarchy around him wouldn’t allow it. Instead, he was used as a means to rhetorical ends for others: “Mr. Garrison followed me, taking me as his text; and now, whether I had made an eloquent speech in behalf of freedom or not, his was one never to be forgotten by those who heard it” (1076). Douglass’ body was used, quite literally, as text. As **ahagedo2** noted: “...it seems that even out of slavery and in his abolition work, he was often reduced to his body; he was more important for the story of his body than his intellect,” and as **gilmanhernandez** elaborated further on this point: “Douglass constructs himself rhetorically, and within the text, Garrison rhetorically disseminates Douglass. There's an interconnectivity of body and speech here that's very interesting.” Keeping in mind however, that the rhetorical interconnectivity of body and speech was immersed in racial hierarchy.

The rhetorical implications regarding identity seem to be particularly true for orators, more so than writers, perhaps because the immediacy, visibility, and manner of an orator’s identity to their audience. The visible body, and therefore the appearance and fashion and mannerisms associated with it, is essential to the orator. If the audience doesn't "buy" the look and feel and style of the author, then they don't "buy" the message. Douglass was able to achieve some credence through the publication of his

written work, though as kpolizzi pointed out earlier, women were not always able to establish authority through either media. Instead, they were forced to establish legitimacy and authority in other ways, not dissimilar to Douglass' experience of being used as a rhetorical "tool" in himself. As **sophist_monster** pointed out in the Douglass piece: "I am also thinking of Palmer's positions that women preachers were not the authorities themselves, but were simply the 'instruments' of the Holy Spirit." As outlined in the intro of the Palmer excerpts: "These examples suggest that speaking by Methodist women still had to be firmly differentiated from the more learned and rationally conscious preaching of men. Yes, the women could speak—but only if it was obvious that the Holy Spirit was providing their words" (1087). This was one of the ways that women tried to find their way around the established social hierarchy that limited their rhetorical capacities. However, though women like Palmer found a loophole through which they could preach, they were still forced to subvert their identities as women and attain legitimacy by claiming that the power of an external agent had overcome them. In line with Rickert's historical materialist model, rhetoric during this nineteenth century period was formed under certain social and cultural hierarchies that limited the emergence of minority identities—and these limitations were based especially on their physical presence. The rhetoricity of Douglass and Palmer depended greatly on their usefulness as tools and channels—their identities could not be distanced from their craft or their credence, and they were often objectified and subverted for the rhetorical ends of others.