Another Para(noid)-rhetoric?
A Response to Diane Davis

David Metzger

Diane Davis' "Addicted to Love" calls on us to question the compatibility of classroom and community in the teaching/learning of composition. Her essay will be, no doubt, an important and helpful prompt for those of us who treat the composition classroom as an opportunity to introduce academic discourse. "Have we not then confused community with classroom?" Davis would ask. And have we not confused our students—made their lives more difficult—because they experience our impossible compromise (classroom cum community) as the demand for a new subject (the "you as academic writer") rather than the demand for a new understanding?

Given that Davis' essay encourages this type of questioning, I see it as the theoretical counterpart of Robert Yagelski's recent piece in CCC, inasmuch as Yagelski and Davis do not assume that, from time to time, bad classes happen to good teachers. Instead, they both suggest that the politics/ethics of the "new subject" of composition is yet to be disclosed. I do not mean to suggest that there are no significant differences between Yagelski and Davis. Unlike Yagelski, Davis works within the tradition of contemporary Continental philosophy. Unlike Yagelski, Davis writes as if the rejection of "story" is a test of rigor. And Davis does so because the disclosure that both she and Yagelski encourage may not, at this time, appear as (or in) a "classroom-community of rhetoric and composition."

What is this disclosure? Davis suggests that the classroom is an instrument for the production of "new subjects," a site for what she calls "squeezure." That is, the classroom others the student and then puts the squeeze on that Other: cough up your signifier, the signifier that makes you not an Other but a subject. Once this signifier has been provided, we might then treat the student as a "new subject" and compel the Other to find its place as—rather than in—the classroom. For example, "this new subject" may be countered by the Other in the form of a teacher's comments or in the comments of other students in group work or even in the imaginary dialogue the student might have with a writing assignment or with the authors of selected readings. In the best of times, this signifier
captures the classroom as Other, representing the classroom (as a subject) just as we would like to see it (us), and we say of the student’s work, “Far exceeds the expectations of the class.” In the worst of times, the student produces a signifier that represents the classroom (as a subject) just as we would not like to see it (us), and we say, “This essay does not address the assignment.”

I don’t hear Davis suggesting that we all teach this way, or even that as teachers we don’t try to work against the classroom. However, she is asking us to consider how this sort of classroom—and it could be any classroom as it is experienced by a student—can be a community if it leaves us with a “we as teachers” and/or a “we as students.” What’s more, her delineation of the phenomenology of the classroom might help us to anticipate the “markedness” of particular types of instruction. If we ask our students to write questions for their midterm, if we ask them to develop their own assignments or work in groups, they will wonder how it is possible for us to evaluate them. “Hey, I don’t feel Othered; hey, you’re not asking me to cough up a signifier but a desire and enthusiasm for writing. How on earth can you evaluate me if what I produce in this class is not going to resist the re-emergence of the Other?”

Here, we can see why Davis’ essay begins with Kant. Kant’s answer to the student’s question, “How will you evaluate me?” would have been, “Because what you produce can take the place of the Other, you will write the Other—well, not the Other, but you will learn to write as if you are an everyone, and that’s close enough for government work.” Davis uses Avital Ronell to confront Kant, suggesting that Kant provides a general logic of addiction—not an Othering but the use of a drug to evaporate our recognition of the Other’s presence. Kant’s response may not appear as an addiction because the Other functions as if it were present (the student embodies this Other as the demands of a teacher, a group, an audience). Davis identifies Kant’s position as the addiction of addiction, the transformation of the Other into a signifier capable of warding off the Other’s presence by making the Other redundant.

That these curious little words, Other and subject, are related to a Lacanian orientation to life experience is made clear in Davis’ quotation from Ronell’s Crack Wars, where we find an even more curious little word: the phallus. [Editor’s Note: Please see the erratum at the end of the Reader Response section.] If the reader does not understand, let alone accept, that the phallus functions as “that which is precisely not of the Other,” then the logic of addiction presented by Davis will make little sense. We must also treat the phallus as a signifier—more particularly, as
a signifier of desire—from which or for which human subjects might be represented (to themselves and to others) as subjects of enjoyment/suffering. That the Other will have nothing to do with this signifier makes it possible to speak of objects as “those which come to the place of the Other,” fooling us into believing that we can suffer or enjoy (produce a new signifier) at the hands of these objects, these surrogate Others:

Phallus: “Hello, this is phallus. Is your Other at home?”
Object: “No, Other can’t come to the phone right now. But I can take a message if you would like.”

We must also assume a particular relation between “signifier” and “subject.” What is a subject? The result of a tripartite act of representation: the subject is a signifier represented by another signifier to another signifier. We might dismiss this notion of a signifier as clunky, old structuralist linguistics, but from my little gloss, I hope it is apparent that Davis is using “signifier” to identify a basic unit in the field of representation (three signifiers and their effect, the subject), and not as pseudo-linguistic jargon for “word.”

For many of us, the significance of Davis’ argument must rest on mapping this quasi-Lacanian, phenomenological model onto Kenneth Burke. We’re more familiar with Burke, to be sure, but, more importantly for Davis, the limitations of Burke may also be the limitations of the classroom. To understand how the possibility of community might (and might not) unfold as classroom may require that we move beyond Burke. Is there a Burke of the classroom (all the rhetoric that’s fit to teach) and a Burke of the community? Indeed, can what we experience in our rhetoric classes as “Burke’s difficulty” be a register of the effectiveness with which Burke’s writing argues for a rhetoric that does not accept the production of a subject as its principal action?

As any number of textbooks would suggest, the identity-identifications-substance model can be taught/learned and the relationship among these three operative terms can be illustrated by means of job ads, advertisements, and press releases. Having been introduced to this form of Burke, students can proceed to “apply” this knowledge by way of providing their own illustrations from job ads, advertisements, press releases, poetry, philosophy, and the like. But Burke’s discussion of the perversion of concerted action and his discussion of mysticism are a little more difficult. Textbooks can provide definitions: perversion is the evacuation of substance into identity; mysticism is the evacuation of
identity into substance. But what allows us to teach and test our students' understanding (a.k.a. application) of mysticism and perversion (and for them to publish their Burkean analysis papers) is the fact that perversion and mysticism are not without their effect at the level of identifications. Burke's staging of perversion and mysticism allows our students to put the squeeze on the Other (identity as substance, substance as identity) created by perversion and mysticism, forcing this Other to produce a signifier that will represent the Other as a subject that could very well cause suffering and joy in others. As rhetoricians, we can then denounce this suffering without assuming that we are in some fashion implicated by it. And, as teachers, we can then evaluate this student work as more or less successful forms of squeeze. My own experiences with the classroom—Burke would support Davis' contention that a particular type of disclosure (the disclosure of the subject) is tied to the need to teach, learn, and evaluate what we might call "rhetorical knowledge"—at least insofar as "rhetorical knowledge" conforms to the persuasion-identification model proposed by Burke. But does the reliance of the classroom on one type of disclosure preclude the recognition, use, and sharing of other types of disclosure? Or does empowering our students simply mean that we teach them how to be more like us? That is, do we think that we have established a learning community and not a classroom when the "we as student" is evacuated into the "we as teacher"?

These questions take us to Burke's discussion of "pure persuasion" and "hierarchic psychosis." These notions are much more difficult to teach and learn—in part because Burke uses them to identify the "final cause" of identification/persuasion. That "pure persuasion" and "hierarchic psychosis" may disclose a communal mystery (the classroom?) at the heart of the "new subject" may also help us to judge the value of Davis' essay in terms of its interchange with Burke. Burke tells us, "Perhaps as near an instance of 'pure persuasion' as one could find is the actor's relation to his audience" (270). Surely, it wouldn't be fair for us to put the squeeze on actors, asking them to produce a signifier that will make them (subjects) responsible for the statements that they present on stage. We can ask these actors to justify their acceptance of particular roles, their choice to work with particular people, or even their choice to deliver a line or speech in a particular way. But there is something else in the speech (precisely its potential function as a mode of identification) that cannot be attributed to the actor. Identification is grounded not in the subject but in something else: what Burke calls "hierarchy." When we, the audience, respond to a particular staging of acts, we are not witnessing the construc-
tion or development of a particular subject; we are witnessing the unfolding of identity and substance at the level of identification. The performance does not appear before us (as audience); it appears with us (actor/play/audience/critic/author/producer) as hierarchy. And this "us" needs no support, merely a prompt, because it is an ordering of identifications that precedes either identity or substance.

In this light, the phrase "classrooms as learning communities" may prove to be a lie inasmuch as our association of classrooms with communities allows us to project the emergence of a signifier (something projected either in terms of a subject or the teacher/student dyad) onto something that operates according to a very different logic (hierarchy). Such a discussion may seem to be far removed from our everyday experiences as academics. But isn't it true that teachers/students receive awards for good teaching/learning, and teachers/students are dismissed for poor teaching/learning? If we want to suggest that a community can be a model for learning/teaching, where are the rewards and punishments for the community?

Now, before we write a grant to fund some community-award system, Davis asks us to rethink the relation of hierarchy and community. What we share as a community of rhetoric/composition folk is not the classroom; it is, Davis hints in the final pages of her essay, something else. To use Davis' language, I would say that we share the prohibition against a particular "unbinding." What are we unbinding? In Burke's scheme, we are unbinding the hierarchical chain of identifications. This "unbinding," in turn, is (dis)associated with the need for a new signifier and the promise that our classrooms should produce new subjects (the subjects of academic discourse). To write a grant to construct a community-award system would be a call for a new signifier, one that could make a subject of the Communal Other as hierarchy, a subject that we could reward or punish.

If there isn't the hope of a community-award grant, what does Davis call for then? A third-sophistic pedagogy that "would invite student-subjects to interrupt their histories by searching out, exposing, and embracing what [Victor] Vitanza calls their 'hysteries': whatever their historical narratives must exclude in order to reproduce themselves. Third sophistic pedagogies would encourage students to de-negate the negations that have made their 'stories' reproducible, to embrace their own ineffability, and so to affirm precisely what divides them as what they share: their radical non-figurability" (650). Davis uses Kant to show us how the production of a close-enough-for-government-work Other emerges
out of the classroom; she uses Heidegger to show us how we need not render this new Other as a subject to be brought before the court of reason/subjectivity, of the Being (understood). She then uses Vitanza to cash out the pedagogical implications of this new Other.

It is important to note that this cashing out makes no mention of teachers. We find in the quotation above the relation of pedagogy and student. But where does pedagogy come from? I would suggest that it is our old friend "classroom" but this time as it has already been experienced by the student. When "classroom" does not ask the student to produce a new signifier and thereby to become a new subject or create a new subject in place of the Other, the student may choose to make a Kantian move, identifying something that can take the place of the Other offered by the classroom: I'm in this class because I have a right to be employed. Or, the student might take a page from Heidegger's *Being and Time* and seek to create an Other (*Da-sein*) that resists subjectification altogether by making others bear its representational burden (*Mit-sein*): I'm in this class because it is required.

Yet, neither Heidegger nor Kant addresses the force required to arrest the production of sameness. That Davis can use Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben to rescript love (as an object choice rather than as the discovery of who or what one is for the Other) hardly addresses the point. If one opposes "love" to "squeeze" (as the not-squeeze of love), can a community handle the paranoia (the "I am the object of the Other's affections") that is prompted by such a move? Paranoiacs surely know a lot, and they surely put off understanding that they might be something other than the shreds of discourse (the collection of surplus meaning) accumulated about them. The only thing I see that could possibly keep this scheme from being a para(noid)-rhetoric is the imperative provided by Vitanza: "embrace [your] own ineffability." But what is to keep students and teachers from experiencing/enjoying this embrace as masters? That is, can a community (when it cashes itself out at the level of the teacher) be anything but a master discourse? And if we propose never to cash out at the level of the teacher, then isn't this a prompt for students to experience the teacher as Other, still a master discourse but, this time, always in the becoming (paranoid)?

It may be that the unspoken *mythos* of Davis' project is the movie *Bob Roberts*. In that movie, we have someone who appears to be paranoid, Bugs Raplin, the editor/reporter of a radical newspaper, *Troubled Times*, who finds that there may be a link between Roberts' anti-drug foundation, "Broken Dove," and State Department drug running. Raplin is framed for
the attempted assassination of Bob Roberts but is released because he could not have pulled the trigger with his palsied right hand. He resists the frame, resists being subjectivized by the new signifier introduced by Roberts into the press. Unfortunately, it is precisely because Raplin cannot be subjectivized by a signifier that Roberts introduces in the press that the reporter/editor must bear the burden of being Bob Roberts' Other. As Burke might have said in the company of Heidegger, "the reporter/editor is the scapegoat; he dies for Roberts." In short, Roberts infinitizes his finitude (his death) by othering Others. Thus, Davis is on pretty solid ground when she suggests this infinitizing of finitude is a bad thing. In response to this bad thing, the movie adds another signifier to the mix, so that we ask, "Who did it?" and answer with a resounding "We did": Bugs Raplin, Bob Roberts, his financial backers, his supporters, his opponents, the producer of the documentary that frames the movie, and those of us who enjoy the movie. And, if this were a different occasion, it might be interesting to see how much of Sharon Crowley's brilliant "We dunnit?" (Composition in the University) might be charted along these same lines.

Davis' response to the political/ethical is quite different; she does, in my view, set the stage for a para-rhetoric and not a para(noid)-rhetoric. She sees that the "We dunnit" is another form of scapegoating, with exigency and history playing the part of a "We" in whose presence some collection of "I's" can weather the storm of conscience or public critique. To her credit, Davis asks us to resist the test of suffering altogether. After that, we can begin to disclose what suffering is because suffering will, no doubt, continue. That this recognition of suffering will require a new pedagogy is another point altogether. It may be that without Davis' own scapegoats (bad infinities, bad metaphysics, bad rhetorics), without her own projection of suffering onto the field of identification-persuasion, the pedagogy she evokes would look very familiar to us—only different.

Old Dominion University
Norfolk, Virginia

Works Cited


---

**Erratum**

The following quotation was inadvertently omitted from D. Diane Davis' article "Addicted to Love'; Or, Toward an Inessential Solidarity." It should have appeared in *JAC* 19, page 636, as an epigram to the section titled "Having Always Already Said 'Yes.'" The Editor regrets this oversight and any confusion it may have caused.

"A quiver in the history of madness (to which no prescription of reason can be simply and rigorously opposed), the chemical prosthesis, the mushroom or plant, respond to a fundamental structure, and not the other way around. Of course, one can be hooked following initiation and exposure but even this supposes a prior disposition to admitting the injectable phallus."

—Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars*