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Energies and Outbursts:
A Response to Laura Micciche

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Ever since Lake Pontchartrain’s levies broke down in the Big Easy, connections among emotion, ethical action, and rhetorical judgment have been weighing heavy in our vernacular discourses.
Maybe I'm saying this because I can't get Kanye West's televised post-Katrina bombshell out of my head: *George Bush doesn't care about black people.* Or maybe it's that the discourses surrounding Katrina victims are now infused with words like *cheats* and *scammers.* Emotions surrounding race, poverty, and government support tend to remind me of Ronald Regan's infamous "welfare queen," who helped the 40th president pass welfare reform acts that continue to leave many people in a bind. Perhaps I am not making too big of a stretch when I hear echoes of Regan's "welfare queen" in the post-Katrina stories about *black women stealing* in the wake of the hurricane. Women (the race usually implied) were said to be buying $800 Louis Vuitton handbags with their government issued FEMA cards ("Lavish Tastes of Card-Carrying Lowlifes," read one sensational headline in the *New York Daily News*).

Meanwhile, figures as seemingly different as Democratic Senator John Edwards and Rich Lowry, the editor of *The National Review,* suggested that the poverty problems both exposed and worsened by the hurricane could be attributed to out-of-wedlock births in New Orleans (Rosen). So, when Kanye West suggests that government (non)action is affected by cultural feelings about black folks, I am not ready to dismiss his connection as an "emotional outburst," as some reports dubbed his speech.

One of the reasons I am not ready to engage in talk of "emotional outbursts" is because I agree with the claims that Laura Micciche makes in "Emotion, Ethics, and Rhetorical Action," where she articulates a structural alliance of action, judgment, and emotion. Micciche claims that we must begin to understand how rhetorical action operates within a context of emotion. Rather than locating ethics within the sole realm of reason or rationality, Micciche wants us to understand "that what counts as ethical hinges on understanding how to act and feel in ways appropriate to a situation" (164). In order to act, Micciche argues, we require more than reason alone. Emotion is the catalyst for the enactment of rhetorical judgment. She writes, "Ethical and rhetorical action is motivated by . . . a judgment that not only emerges from reasoned deliberation but also from experience and belief and feeling about
what is right, what is just" (168–69). Reshaping the Aristotelian *pisteis* from a kind of "separate but equal" three-headed state, Micciche suggests that *pathos* underwrites ethical judgment, which is often framed in terms of *logos*-centric discourse. These claims also echo the guiding shape of Micciche's important coedited collection, *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*. In the collection's introduction, Micciche and coeditor Dale Jacobs explain, "[W]e are interested in . . . emotion as a central ingredient in the act of persuasion that has the potential to move our discipline in new directions" (2). Likewise, Micciche's article in *JAC* explores emotion as a "central ingredient" in rhetorical action. It is this emphasis that makes Micciche's recent work so relevant and welcome to the larger sphere of public rhetoric scholarship. Talk of *emotional outbursts* fails to achieve much explanatory power. Although it may not be true that "George Bush doesn't care about black people," or even that an overt racism led to poor decisions in New Orleans, the structural alliance of judgment and emotion helps us to understand that there is no rhetorical action free from emotional-contexts, including feelings about race.

Indeed, Micciche seems particularly interested in complicating our *valuation* of emotion in the process of ethical reasoning. Moving away from the discourses of a well-established emotional/rational binary, she attempts to redress the misperception that emotions obscure rational judgment. Working from Martha Nussbaum's philosophy of emotion, Micciche maintains that emotions are not something to be bracketed off in pursuit of ethical reasoning. The longstanding image of judgment clouded by a fog of emotion—an often *gendered* condition of fog—is thus a "narrow and inaccurate representation of rhetorical action and judgment formation" (169). Such revaluation of emotion and ethical reason is not, in itself, a new claim. In *Upheavals of Thought*, for example, Nussbaum suggests that emotions possess several defining characteristics: they are thoughts that have an object, and they embody a way of seeing through a belief about that object (26–28). Nussbaum thus argues that emotions understand their objects as
invested with a value. Modifying a Greek Stoic view on emotion, Nussbaum frequently refers to this local characteristic in terms of the *eudaimonistic*: a cognitive form of evaluative judgment that ascribes importance to external things for our own flourishing (22). For Nussbaum, emotions always involve thought of an object and thought of an object’s salience to and for thinking subjects.

Yet, Micciche’s article expands this theory by placing it alongside rhetoric and composition pedagogy, where she makes a nice thorn in the side of our pedagogical blooms. (And a delightfully sharp thorn it is.) Consider the history of rhetoric and emotion, and you soon get an earful of warning about emotion’s meddlesome presence in the sphere of reason. For instance, Wayne Brockriede’s classic essay, “Arguers as Lovers,” uses sexual metaphors to warn about the dangers of argument by *seduction*, which “operates through charm or deceit” (4). The seductive rhetor works through the emotionally charged channels of charm, deception, and ruse. Brockriede warns: “The *pathos* and *ethos* of a discourse, the image of the arguer, his style, and his delivery may bedazzle a coarguer into giving his assent in a manner quite analogous to the act of seduction” (4). That is, rather than sticking primarily to reasoned discourse, rhetoric sometimes veers off into sensual effects. These effects put the audience in the position of making a decision from the *feeling of being swayed*. Listening to the rhythm of rhetoric, feeling the flood of sensations, the listener is lulled “into lowering his guard through the argumentative equivalent of soft lights” (4). The listener is thus grooved, bedazzled, and rused by the emotional seduction of rhetoric—apart from the better judgment of reason.

It would be an understatement to say that rhetorical pedagogy hasn’t been too receptive of emotional primacy in the work of *phronesis* (see Micciche’s excellent discussion of the impoverished treatment of *pathos* in textbooks on page 146). However, Micciche takes her place in a tradition of scholars who challenge this mistrust of emotion. Wayne Booth attempted an earlier challenge in his discussion of *good reasons*, which facilitate a climate
of nonviolent engagement and discourse with others. Booth argues that emotion and feeling are not threats to such rhetorical reasoning since "good reasons" do not operate only through rationality and logic. The problem with much rhetorical theory is that it fails to honor the feeling-full function of rhetoric that comprises our selves. As Booth says of the standard strains of rhetorical theory, "[T]heir almost complete denigration of argument from authority, witnesses, and testimony, and their uncritical divorce of thought and emotion (the latter almost always for them suspect) will have to be revised" (141). In Booth's version, as in Micciche's essay, the emotional capacity of rhetorical reasoning is not suspicious; it is necessary. In extending this line of rhetorical scholarship, therefore, Micciche rethinks the relationship of judgment and affectivity in valuable ways.

I also see Micciche working in the same spirit as Ernesto Grassi, who argues for the primacy of what he calls "rhetorical" language over rational, or "philosophical" language. In his essay "Rhetoric and Philosophy," he decouples the emotion/reason binary lingering from the Enlightenment by showing how rational/philosophical speech has long been held as an ultimate, primary, or originary kind of discourse. As Grassi explains the Enlightenment ideal of demonstration: "We claim we know something when we are able to prove it. To prove [apo-deiknumi] means to...[establish] the definition of a phenomenon by tracing it back to ultimate principles, or archai" (19). Rational discourse thus depends upon tracing back various claims to their prior principles. In a discourse that privileges the operation of philosophy and rationality, "[r]hetoric is seen only as a technical doctrine of speech" (19). That is, rhetoric is understood as only the technique of persuading others through emotion, flowery language, and sensations. Grassi agrees that rhetoric is not the language of apo-deiknumi, or the tracing back to prove originary, primary principles. However, he also argues that the demonstration of prior principles within logical/rational discourse cannot ultimately rest on archai. "It is clear that the first archai of any proof and hence of knowledge cannot be proved themselves because they cannot be the object of..."
demonstrative, logical speech; otherwise they would not be first assertions," Grassi explains (19). Primary principles cannot be proven via the same process of demonstration that they ground.

Consider this *archai's* catch-22, leaving philosophical and rational speech in a bit of a bind. "[I]f the original assertions are not demonstratable," asks Grassi, "what is the character of speech in which we express them? Obviously this type of speech cannot have a rational-theoretical character" (19). In response, Grassi suggests that the first principles, or *archai*, are instead *indicative* or *allusive*, not rational. That is, the first principles cannot be proven, but are instead evoked, revealed, and conjured by a non-rational sense. As Grassi continues, "[W]e are forced to admit that the primal clarity of the principles is not rational and recognize that the corresponding language in its indicative structure has an 'evangelic' character, in the original Greek sense of this word, i.e., 'noticing'" (20). If the most originary of principles cannot be proven (for if it could, it would no longer be an originary principle), then they can only be disclosed in a kind of revelation. Grassi here takes issue with a view that only considers the emotive as a "helpmeet" to rationality:

> [O]ver the centuries, . . . the thesis was again and again developed that images and rhetoric were to be appreciated primarily . . . as aids to "alleviate" the "severity" and "dryness" of rational language. To resort to images and metaphors, to use the full set of implements proper to rhetoric and artistic language, in this sense, merely serves to make it "easier" to absorb rational truth. (26)

However, Grassi continues, there would be no possibility of rational language whatsoever if not for the ability of rhetoric to *evoke* the first principles which cannot be proven. "The *techne* of rhetoric, as the art of persuasion, of forming belief, structures the emotive framework which creates the tension within which words . . . acquire their passionate significance. It creates a tension through which the audience is literally 'sucked into' the framework designed by the author," writes Grassi (26). It is not that "the emotive
framework" helps rational discourse to operate better. Rather, the very "beginning" of rhetorical discourse is always evoked.

Grassi does not conceive of a "separate but equal" partnership between emotion and reason. His theory imagines the processes of reasoning as an emotive process. Every single deployment of ethical judgment and rhetorical reasoning is evocative: emotion is always on the scene. I labor over Grassi's argument because his language offers another context for understandings Micciche's claims. When she discusses the CCCC position statement, "Students' Right to Their Own Language," for example, we might hear echoes of Grassi in her analysis. Micciche explains that the CCCC statement is not "merely an intellectualized discussion" since we find a deployment of "emotional discourse to establish a set of principles" for a more ethical writing pedagogy (171). She highlights the statement's use of the imperative mood, which emphasizes what "must" be done in order to preserve justice and a democratic language policy. "We must decide what elements of our discipline are really important to us," Micciche quotes from the statement, "whether we want to . . . say with Langston Hughes: I play cool and dig all jive/That's the reason I stay alive. . . ." (173). Perhaps there is no way to prove the first principle of such language policies beyond an evangelic noticing. The "Students' Right" statement depended on the ability to play cool, as Hughes puts it. Like Grassi, Micciche suggests that the language of rhetorical evocation (reflected in the statement's use of hyperbole, metaphor, and rhetorical questions) creates an emotive framework where words acquire their reasonable significance. Rather than seeing emotion as a "helpmeet" to rhetorical judgment, we come to see the inextricable connection between the two.

Micciche is thus getting at the emotive power of reason—the pathos of logos, so to speak. Or, to put it another way, she lands upon the rhetorical energies of language (not to mention the energy of rhetorical language). Juxtapose this point with Kenneth Burke's connection between persuasion and people's attitudinal orientations. As Burke explores the etymological roots of persuasion, he discovers the Greek term for persuasion, peitho, and
Aristotle’s term, *pistis* ("proof"), have resonations with the Latin word for “faith.” At the same time, Burke continues, the Latin root of “persuasion,” *suadere*, is related to our words “suavity,” “assuage,” and “sweet” (*Rhetoric* 52). Yet, we should remember that this *sweetness* of persuasion does not carry an ethically positive value, since it can also have devastating effects. Consider the *sweetness* of attitude (evocation, emotionality) in “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle,” where Burke points out the power of emotionally inducing the German people to identify as Aryans, as pan-Germans, as anti-Jewish. The Nazi’s greatest source of power was not their ability to persuade people through the *content* of their rhetoric (192). Instead, the Nazi’s strength lay in this unifying movement of the people; it lay in the power of (an evil) communion that worked through the evocative *sweetness* of *suadere*. Rhetorical energies of language are sometimes quite dark.

This point brings me to one problematic aspect of “Emotion, Ethics, and Rhetorical Action.” Unlike Burke (or Grassi, for that matter), Micciche seems implicitly to suggest an affirmative—even liberatory—power of emotion. Consider her analysis of an article that describes a case of “inappropriate” emotional display in a professional administrative document. She paraphrases the article’s narrative of how one working-class academic uses a reappointment dossier for disclosing her feelings in the classroom and in her own personal professional development. This academic writes of her “lack of intention, the aimlessness that characterized her life before becoming an academic, which allowed her to see “herself in her students and to invite the institution to recognize her students’ potential” (175). Not surprisingly, university administrators read this dossier narrative as inappropriate—even “artless” (174). Micciche argues that the academic writer knew the emotional limits of such a genre (where emotional discourses are not considered appropriate), but chose to challenge them. In this writer’s case, the administration linked her display of emotions with the *personal*, a realm out of place for academic professional reflection. Micciche seems to reads this scene as a powerful display of emotion’s social character, which is capable of pushing
against ideological constraints placed upon subjects: “When we see that emotions do in fact have a social character, we begin to understand why they might be seen as dangerous, for this insight suggests that emotions function as a resource to create change...” (176). The dossier narrative’s emotional display is thus held up as a progressive challenge to the power-structured rules of emotional enculturation. Micciche’s analysis of this scene concludes with a sense that emotional display is, in and of itself, progressive.

I find this element of Micciche’s argument rather knotty. For one thing, I am bothered by the class implications of this “challenge.” We can even bracket the fact that this “challenge” does not actually disrupt any expectations from a gendered perspective (since women are expected to be emotional at inappropriate moments, after all). But Micciche herself does not consider the power reinforcement that this dossier might also have effected. True, the emotional disclosures did challenge expectations for the genre of professional teaching statements. But does this challenge “subvert and problematize pre-fab categories of professional identity”? (176). My guess is that it worked more to reinscribe the ideological identity of the “overly-emotional” working class. The narrative is, in fact, quite easy to dismiss as just another emotional outburst that does not demand to be taken seriously. I am again reminded of the public response to Kanye West’s statement after Hurricane Katrina. Is it possible that his claim was dismissed as “typical” inappropriate behavior of a black man? (The thought has occurred to me more than once.) Rather than challenging the administrative readers to rethink their own emotional underwritings leading to this teacher’s condemnation, I suggest that the reason/emotion binary is likely to be reinforced by this situation.

The affirmation and call to emotion is not one that deserves a quick rush of enthusiasm. Instead of praising emotion as a libratory force, we should remember the sometimes deadly sweetness that drives certain rhetorics. The evocative power of the Nazi’s rhetoric helps to remind us that emotion is not so different from the ambivalent terms Foucault and Deleuze both used to describe
power and desire. The intensity of power is neither negative nor positive, neither oppressive nor liberating. Rather, power is intensity in a raw form. Productive desire fuels even the most fascist discourses and movements (Deleuze and Guattari 165). Feeling the good (as ethical judgment) is not the same as feeling good all the time. Or, to put my critique more bluntly, the display and enactment of emotion has no inherent liberatory potential. I raise this as a reminder because of the increasing body of work in composition being done on affect and emotion. Grassi and Burke both manage to trace the evocative, emotive movement of ethical action without falling into the trap of affirmation. We should follow their lead on this matter.

Nevertheless, in spite of this complex question, Micciche's essay is crucial for thinking about public discourse right now. She brings a new emphasis on discussions of difference in public culture—rather than identity based discussions. Micciche opens up a focus on how judgment and emotion are inseparably braided together. For an egregious example of differences that make a difference in recent American public life, we might return to the disaster in New Orleans. The mistrust and rage within post-Katrina discourse reflects the need for a new rhetorical model that is capable of conceptualizing the explosive emotionality of racial issues with the (seemingly) unemotional discourse of bureaucracy. As Micciche writes, rhetorical work is infused with an "intimate connection between ethics and emotion, pressing us to deal with the significance of caring and not caring about differences in our classrooms and other sites where we engage rhetorical action" (180). Once the significance of this argument sinks in—and I hope it will—it's even possible to see the legitimacy of a lone rapper's "emotional outburst" on an otherwise forgettable night of television. Kanye West couldn't have said it better himself: ethical decisions are not devoid of emotional energies.

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Works Cited


