Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted

Individual agency is necessary for the possibility of rhetoric, and especially for deliberative rhetoric, which enables the composition of what Latour calls a good common world. Drawing on neurophenomenology, this essay defines individual agency as the process through which organisms create meanings through acting into the world and changing their structure in response to the perceived consequences of their actions. Conceiving of agency in this way enables writers to recognize their rhetorical acts, whether conscious or nonconscious, as acts that make them who they are, that affect others, and that can contribute to the common good. Responsible rhetorical agency entails being open to and responsive to the meanings of concrete others, and thus seeing persuasion as an invitation to listeners as also always agents in persuasion.

Agency has been a problem—and not only in the field(s) of rhetoric and composition—for a long time. If we accept that we live in a globalized world in which not only economies, cultures, and languages but also environmental crises are increasingly intertwined in complex systems, and we accept the death of the subject—the death of the centered, conscious, rational self—the possibility of agency seems increasingly impossible. An insistent question that arises, then, is whether we must simply resign ourselves to modernist lamenting or postmodern rejoicing at the loss of our responsibility for the way our world turns out, or whether some notion of human agency in bringing about positive changes can be rescued. I’m for rescuing, rather than lamenting or rejoicing.
We have for a long time understood an agent as one who through conscious intention or free will causes changes in the world. But I suggest that neither conscious intention nor free will—at least as we commonly think of them—is involved in acting or bringing about change: though the world changes in response to individual action, agents are very often not aware of their intentions, they do not directly cause changes, and the choices they make are not free from influence from their inheritance, past experiences, or their surround. I argue that agency is an emergent property of embodied individuals. Agents do reflect on their actions consciously; they do have conscious intentions and goals and plans; but their agency does not arise from conscious mental acts, though consciousness does play a role. Agency instead is based in individuals’ lived knowledge that their actions are their own. As Jane Bennett suggests, “agency is the . . . capacity to make a difference in the world without knowing quite what you are doing” (155).

My argument rests on complexity theory and on an enactive approach to the study of mind, also known as neurophenomenology. Complex systems (an organism, a matter of concern) are self-organizing: order (and change) results from an ongoing process in which a multitude of agents interact frequently and in which the results of interactions feed back into the process. Emergent properties (such as agency) are not epiphenomena, nor “possessions” in any sense, but function as part of the systems in which they originate. And causation in complex systems is nonlinear: change arises not as the effect of a discrete cause, but from the dance of perturbation and response as agents interact.

Complex systems theory parallels phenomenology in seeing such things as perception, behavior, and knowing as emergent from the processes of living in the world. In the last decade, some neuroscientists and cognitive scientists have adopted an enactive approach, which combines neuroscience and phenomenology to develop understandings of cognitive processes and brain dynamics as embodied nonlinear self-organizing systems interacting with the surround. Evan Thompson explains that this approach views the nervous system as “an autonomous dynamic system . . . [which] does not process information in the computationalist sense, but creates meaning” and views experience not as “an epiphenomenal side issue, but central to any understanding of the mind” (13). My main source in discussing the neurodynamics that underlie agency as an emergent property of individuals is the work of neuroscientist Walter Freeman, who uses the enactive approach to explain “how brains make up their minds.” Freeman’s concern in his book of that title is to account for the active agency of individuals through explaining the nonlinear dynamics of self-organization.
that support the capacity to choose as “an essential and unalienable property of human life” (4–5).

In proposing a neurophenomenological account of the emergence of rhetorical agency, I turn for an example to the speech on race Barack Obama delivered in Philadelphia during the 2008 presidential campaign (“More”). Notable for its rhetorical effectiveness, the speech—its motivation, composition, and reception—was much commented on, and thus I can make reasonable, if not definitive, hypotheses about why Obama responded as he did. I also contrast my approach to rhetorical agency with that of Carolyn Miller and that of Carl Herndl and Adela Licona, and I relate it to work on persuasion, ethos, and kairos by other rhetoric scholars. I conclude by arguing that responsible rhetorical agency is a matter of acknowledging and honoring the responsive nature of agency and that this is the kind of agency that supports deliberative democracy. But first, as suggested in my opening paragraph, I need to address the question of the subject in order to discriminate that concept from what I call embodied individual agency.

**Death to the Subject**

The question of the subject has been a central obstacle in defining a productive notion of agency. Miller notes that “the decentering of the subject . . . signals a crisis for agency, or perhaps more accurately, for rhetoric, since traditional rhetoric requires the possibility for influence that agency entails” (143). Thomas Rickert observes that subjectivity was a focus of attention in composition studies in the early 1990s, “especially the decentering or fragmentation of the subject, which was held to jeopardize political and rhetorical agency,” but “the constructed nature of the subject” was also a concern for the same reasons (10). Herndl and Licona amplify the problem of the social construction of the subject, referring to John Clifford’s opposition between the “autonomous, rational actors” assumed by composition handbooks and the “carceral model of subjectivity, as a nonporous, inflexible category into which subjects are interpellated by ideology and determined by discourse,” and they assert that “neither of these formulations explains the rhetorical and social phenomena we experience” (136).

Reports of the death of the subject seem to be premature, however. The decentering or fragmentation of the subject has resulted instead in the birth of
new poststructural, postmodern, and posthumanist versions that deny that a subject can “have” agency. The new subjects are assumed to be so fragmented that they are incapable of coherent intentions or actions, and agency is merely a position into which they are interpellated, a role they can perform or a node they can occupy temporarily. Miller and Herndl and Licona accept this understanding of subjectivity and thus offer theories of agency as detached from the subject, proposing that agency is “an attribution made by another agent” (Miller 150; emphasis in the original) or proposing an “agent function” along the lines of Foucault’s author function: “the postmodern subject becomes an agent when she occupies the agentive intersection of the semiotic and the material through a rhetorical performance” (Herndl and Licona 141). Rickert takes a somewhat different tack, embracing Zizek’s post-Oedipal subject to argue for a transgressive/transformative writing pedagogy (190–98) while arguing that students are “productive agents already” and that “pedagogy does not so much instill productive agency as reshape, redirect, and redistribute what is already there” (119).

A robust theory of agency is needed to buttress claims for the efficacy of rhetoric. Such a theory should not assume that agency is a possession and should acknowledge that students (as rhetors) are always productive agents. But, most importantly, a workable theory of agency requires the death not only of the modernist subject but of the whole notion of the subject.

The subject is inescapably defined by an agonistic relation to the object/other: the subject attempts to control the object/other in order to escape being controlled, but, cut off from the Real by language, the subject, as Lacan conceives it, is “interminably ensnared in [the] unanswerable question” of what the other desires (Rickert 88). Any theory of agency that depends upon a notion of the subject is thus hamstrung at the start, struggling with how to account for any action that is not either determined by or resistant to semiotic, social, political, and material others or orders. This is why Herndl and Licona can offer only an agent function: “the conjunction of the subject’s dispositions [habitus] and the temporary and contingent conditions of possibility for rhetorical action” (138). This is why Rickert, despite his cogent critique of critique as a pedagogy...
of empowerment and his admirable resistance to resistance as a form of agency can offer in the end only pedagogical strategies that “circumvent, forestall, or resist the replication of authoritarian or protoviolent modes of control” (190) and only “fleeting and provisional” means for “achieving resistance through subjective transformations” (191). It is also why Judith Butler’s performative notion of agency as repetition with a difference is in the end so unsatisfying, as the subject’s actions are inevitably structured by the very norms that it attempts to resist (144–45).

Many have tried to do away with the troublesome subject-object dyad. Phenomenologists from Husserl to Levinas attempted to reduce the subject-object opposition through focusing on connections between the subject and the other and between subjects and their perceived and experienced reality. Heidegger went the furthest, insisting that “the ontological constitution of the Self is not to be traced back either to an ‘I’-substance or to a ‘subject’” (369), but many French theorists who followed Heidegger (e.g., Sartre, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard) instead opted for the new poststructural and postmodern subjects. Deleuze and Guattari, in contrast, do kill off the subject by disintegrating it into forces and vectors and seeing change as a product of interactions in complex systems, an approach embraced by Victor Vitanza and other “third sophistic” rhetoricians. It is a useful approach in many ways—except that it leaves no room for any notion of embodied agency and individual responsibility.

In contrast, Bruno Latour argues that “humans no longer have to make this choice that is imposed on subjects” by Plato’s myth of the Cave, the choice between a free disembodied interiority, cut off from other subjects and from objects, or an unfree social construction (Politics 51). He observes that the split between subject and object (a correlative to that between Nature and Society) was instituted to predetermine, and thereby to master, the orderliness of both realms rather than searching for the conditions under which they could speak to one another in a “collective,” and he suggests instead that both humans and nonhumans are actors, in the sense that their actions make a difference to other actors. Latour says: “Actors are defined above all as obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way of domination, as what interrupts the closure and the composition of the collective. To put it crudely, human and nonhuman actors appear first of all as troublemakers” (Politics 81). Actors, or agents, are entities that act; by virtue of their action they necessarily bring about changes. (It should go without saying here that all actions are embodied, including what are thought of as “mental” actions—speaking, writing, reflect-
Because actors always “emerge in surprising fashion, lengthening the list of beings that must be taken into account” (79; emphasis in the original), the collective “is not a thing in the world, a being with fixed and definitive borders, but a movement of establishing provisional cohesion that will have to be started all over again every single day” (147). Order is always a provisional and temporary achievement, because agents are always doing things that make a difference. Unlike subjects, agents are defined neither by mastery, nor by determination, nor by fragmentation. They are unique, embodied, and autonomous individuals in that they are self-organizing, but by virtue of that fact, they, as well as the surround with which they interact, are always changing.

**Obama’s Response**

President Barack Obama is acknowledged—if not always applauded—across the political spectrum as an accomplished rhetor. The speech he gave in Philadelphia, entitled “A More Perfect Union,” was widely hailed as a nuanced and powerful treatment of the question of race as well as an effective intervention in the media furor that had erupted in March 2008 over the circulation of what were labeled as incendiary remarks from the sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the minister of Trinity United Church of Christ, of which Obama was a member. Thomas Sugrue calls it “the defining speech of his political career” (92) and comments that Obama “turned what was a crisis of legitimacy into an extraordinary opportunity—and in the process offered a powerful, sophisticated, and wide-ranging address, surely the most learned disquisition on race from a major political figure ever” (118).

In the first fourteen minutes of the speech, Obama stated his belief that we cannot solve our challenges unless we solve them together and suggested that he believes this because of his experience of being a member of a multiracial family and of the black community at Trinity United Church of Christ. Obama stated, “it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one.” He then articulated his reason for addressing the issue of race:

> The politically safe thing would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the woodwork. . . . But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. . . . If we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.
This is a clear example of emergent rhetorical agency: a response to a perturbation that is shaped by the rhetor’s current goals and past experiences. Erec Smith says that Obama’s success in this speech was due to his seizing the kairotic moment of the furor over Reverend Wright’s words to establish his ethos as a “living personification of the American melting pot” (5). Obama’s response was not dictated by the rhetorical situation nor by his past experiences, but it also clearly was not a response that came out of nowhere; it was a choice he made among options. In his book *Dreams from My Father*, Obama explicitly recognized the dependence of his choices on the structure of his experiences and situation. He wrote about his choice to become a community organizer: “I can see that my choices were never truly mine alone—and that is how it should be, that to assert otherwise is to chase after a sorry sort of freedom” (134). His choice of how to respond this time, to articulate what he believed and wanted to say about race at this moment, could, like his earlier choice, be traced to a “larger narrative,” one he had been living and reflecting on and writing for many years. Like all responses, it emerged from the ongoing process of his becoming the person he is, as he responded to the world he encountered and the history he studied and as neural populations interacted within the complex system of his brain, creating emotions, intentions, moods, dispositions, meanings, memories, goals, and narratives.

**Agency as an Emergent Property of Embodied Individuals**

As illustrated by Obama’s speech, individual agency is necessary for the possibility of rhetoric, and especially for deliberative rhetoric, which enables the composition of what Latour calls a good common world. The enactive approach explains the location and nature of this kind of agency as the process through which organisms create meanings through acting into the world and changing their structure in response to the perceived consequences of their actions (see Figure 1). Complexity theorists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela call this process *structural determination*, stating that the interaction between an organism and the surround “is not instructive, for it does not determine what its effects are going to be... the changes that result from the interaction between the living being and its environment are brought about by the disturbing agent but *determined by the structure of the disturbed system*” (96; emphasis in the original). Freeman refers to the process as assimilation,
or intentionality; he translates Merleau-Ponty’s intentional arc into a diagram of brain function in terms of feedforward and feedback loops that initiate actions into the surround and receive sensory stimulation from the surround and from the body in response, forming and constraining spatial patterns of action potentials and shaping and biasing attractor landscapes in the brain (102). By this process, each individual nervous system is creatively and uniquely structured in an ongoing way.

Both Maturana and Freeman refer to their work on perception as the origin of their understanding of the active response of organisms to perturbations. Instead of neurons passively “storing a memory,” as earlier theories had proposed, Freeman argues that neurons interact to create a pattern that is not a representation of an odor or color, for example, nor information about an odor or color, but rather a response unique to each sensing individual, shaped by each individual organism’s history and shaped anew in every iteration. In response to recurrent stimuli, synapses between neurons are strengthened, forming neuron assemblies that respond as a whole to input coming from any of the neurons in the assemblies. Synaptic modifications from equivalent stimuli form a basin of attraction that leads to patterns of amplitude modification (AM). The structure of these patterns is determined by the structure of the assemblies as it has developed through past experiences. Freeman explains: “The form of the

---

Figure 1. The enactive approach explains the interaction between organisms and their surround (and between neuron assemblies and stimuli) as a process of self-organization through feedback loops (circular causation). Interacting units are neither autonomous nor determined by the other, but instead continually restructure themselves as the structure of each unit responds in its own way to perturbations from the other. Maturana and Varela refer to this process as structural determination and structural coupling; Freeman refers to it as assimilation.
input from the world is assimilated by the form of the AM pattern in the brain through successive steps of creation by the brain... the form of the input is not transferred or injected as information into the meaning structure of a brain. Instead, the brain creates an individualized pattern that is compatible with the history and goals of the organism” (82). This pattern is what the odor or color means to the particular organism, a pattern and a meaning that is constantly changing with the ongoing experiences of the organism.

This process of the creation of meaning is the basic property of intentionality, as Freeman explains:

The positive and negative feedback loops of neural populations are responsible for this ability to create behavior freshly with each new moment. The state transition between attractors is the way in which itinerant trajectories of brain activity arise, governing what we experience as habitual behaviors, and it is the landscape of attractors formed by learning that is responsible for reliable sequences of goal-directed behaviors. These attractors and behaviors are constructions by brains, not merely readouts of fixed action patterns. No two replications are identical: like handwritten signatures, they are easily recognized but are never twice exactly the same. (62–63)

He concludes: “This dynamic system is the self in each of us. It is the agency in charge, not our awareness, which is constantly trying to catch up with what we do. We perceive the world from inside our boundaries as we engage it and then change ourselves by assimilation” (139).

The process of assimilation defines an agent as an individual with his or her own intentions and goals; individual agents are determinate, but not determined, in an ongoing becoming driven by the interactions among the components of their nervous system and by their interaction with the surround. Intentional actions emerge in a continuous loop involving a number of stages (see Figure 2), beginning with the formation of short- and long-term goals, followed by emotions, intention, action, interpretation of sensory input, and, finally, learning, by which “the consequences of a just completed action are being organized and integrated into meaning” (Freeman 135). Learning closes the loop, as goals are modified by the results of the just-completed cycle. Both
nonconscious and conscious processes contribute to intentional action, and agents are aware of only some of the processes as they take place. The part of the loop involving intent, action, and the creation of the meaning of sensory input is largely nonconscious, as is the resultant formation of memories and dispositions. Through these processes, the agent is provided with meaning for free.11

Meaning provided for free—meanings built up nonconsciously through living—accounts in large part for our ability to respond quickly to rhetorical (and other) situations, as Obama did in composing his speech.12 On the day after ABC broadcast the video clips from Reverend Wright’s sermons, he told David

---

**Figure 2.** The neurodynamic intentional arc explains the emergence of intentional actions through a continuous loop of conscious and nonconscious processes in the nervous system. Learning and the formation of goals are conscious processes shaped by global patterns in the brain often in the form of narratives; emotions, intention, action, and the interpretation of sensory stimuli are largely nonconscious processes involving AM patterns, basins of attraction, neuron assemblies, and neuromodulators producing memories, narratives, moods, and dispositions. Conscious processes are open to awareness as are some borderline nonconscious processes (prereflexive awareness and what Dreyfus calls *skillful coping* and Giddens calls *practical consciousness*). Loss of circumspection can disrupt the intentional arc bringing nonconscious processes to awareness.
Axelrod that he wanted to give a speech on race, and late at night on the next day, he called his speechwriter Jonathan Favreau and dictated his thoughts in a stream of consciousness that Favreau called “pretty much a first draft . . . the logic of the speech was all there” (qtd. in Remnick 522). Favreau worked on the structure the next day, and Obama sent a final draft to him and other aides two days later, saying that he wanted no substantial changes in it.

Obama’s immediate emotions in preparing the speech are suggested by what he said when he talked by phone with Favreau: Favreau asked how Obama was and reports that he replied, “You know, I’ve had better days, but, this is what you deal with when you run for President. I should be able to tell people this and explain what happened and say what I believe. And if it goes right it could be a teaching moment” (qtd. in Remnick 522). He was distressed by the impression of Wright conveyed by the video clips but confident that he could and should respond to the situation in a productive way. Emotions are intentions to act in a certain way13: “actions well up from within the organism, and they are directed toward some future state, which is being determined by the animal in accordance with its perceptions of its evolving condition and history” (Freeman 92–93). As mentioned above, emotions, intentions, actions, meanings, memories, dispositions, and narratives emerge from the complex system of the nervous system through processes of which the agent is mostly not aware. Experiments by Benjamin Libet and others show that the awareness of intent to perform an act follows the neural activity involved in planning and organizing an act. Neurologist Antonio Damasio also observes that we are often not conscious of our emotions (and thus of our intentions) and that although we can try to conceal them, we cannot control them: “we are about as effective at stopping an emotion as we are at preventing a sneeze” (49). Emotions are, at base, preparations for action, and we become aware of them (as others do, often before we do) only when they are expressed in publicly observable, and internally felt, adaptations of the body that serve as signals of intent.

Emotions are, at base, preparations for action, and we become aware of them (as others do, often before we do) only when they are expressed in publicly observable, and internally felt, adaptations of the body that serve as signals of intent.

Obama’s statements to Axelrod and Favreau show that he was eager to address the topic of race—according to Remnick, he had been considering
speaking about race “for months and had been talked out of it by the staff” (521). He was confident that he could explain why Wright made such comments and that he could turn the possible debacle into a teaching moment, an opportunity to mediate seemingly irreconcilable racial tensions and misunderstandings. His emotions in response to the situation were shaped by his particular experiences with race and his study of the history and literature of the civil rights and black power movements as well as by his short-term goal of demonstrating presidential leadership abilities and his long-term goal of changing the public response to race. Explaining Obama’s ability to address explosive racial issues confidently, Martha Minow, one of his mentors at Harvard, said, “Obama is black, but without the torment . . . his life came largely—not completely, but largely—without the terrible oppression” (qtd. in Remnick 195). After the speech, Bob Moses observed, “People said he couldn’t afford to be the angry black candidate, but the point is that he is not angry” (qtd. in Remnick 526). Responding to the immediate rhetorical situation, his emotions led to his intention to speak out on race and to the action of composing and delivering the speech. Afterward, the reactions to the speech were interpreted and fed back into his ongoing construction of meanings and goals in the learning stage of the intentional arc.

Emotional interpretation is the first stage in a process of emotional self-organization that takes place over repeated cycles of the intentional arc. Emotional interpretation is the first stage in a process of emotional self-organization that takes place over repeated cycles of the intentional arc. The action of neuromodulators such as histamine, dopamine, endorphins, vasopressin, and norepinephrine, which cause long-lasting changes in synaptic gains throughout the cerebral hemispheres, are, as Freeman notes, “essential for intentional action, including emotion, and for the construction of meaning, including remembering” (108). They are responsible as well for moods and dispositions, which develop over longer spans of time. Thompson explains the neurodynamics of these processes using Marc Lewis’s dynamic system model of emotional self-organization (see Figure 3). In emotional interpretation, “cognitive and emotional processes modify each other continuously on a fast time-scale,” resulting in “a global state of emotion-cognition coherence, comprising an appraisal of a situation, an affective tone, and an action plan . . . a global intention for acting on the world” (Thompson 371–73). Emotional interpretations are brief and not necessarily coherent, and they succeed each other rapidly. In the immediate process of composing a speech, many emotional
interpretations (meanings) emerge and begin to cohere over hours or days in part through the development of moods, which alter the landscape of attractors within which transient emotional interpretations occur (378). Finally, over a much longer span of time, personality emerges: “temporally extended, long-term patterns of habitual emotions linked with habitual appraisals, built up especially from moods” (381).

Personality or, as I prefer to call it, disposition is how we experience the neurodynamic structure of individuals, ourselves included, and we can discern in Obama’s speech long-term patterns of self-possession and mediation that characterize his rhetorical personality. In his book Saving Persuasion, political scientist Bryan Garsten argues that people who are skilled at deliberative rhetoric, which Obama clearly is, have good judgment, which he traces to having “not only . . . the requisite intellectual quickness and cleverness but also . . . the right dispositions or habits of affective responses” (8). He comments that these dispositions or

Figure 3. Emotional self-organization arises through repeated cycles of the neurodynamic intentional arc. Emotional interpretations form in single cycles and succeed each other rapidly. Over days or hours, emotional interpretations begin to cohere into moods, and eventually the long-term patterns that comprise personality or disposition emerge.
habits develop partly from nature (emotional self-construction) and partly by education, and that they “allow [rhetors] a measure of self-possession; from that relatively steady perspective they will be able to imagine accurately and empathetically what it would be like to take various courses of action” (8). Obama’s self-possession is often commented on. Referring to the Philadelphia speech, Moses said of Obama, “His confidence in himself—and his peacefulness with himself—came through in a way that can’t be faked” (qtd. in Remnick 526). Christopher Edley Jr., one of Obama’s professors at Harvard, said, “I claim to have been the first to use the phrase ‘preternatural calmness’ to describe him. That’s what was so striking about him. . . . he seemed so centered that, in combination with his evident intelligence, I just wanted to buy stock in him” (qtd. in Remnick 217). In assessing Obama’s work in the U.S. Senate, Remnick, like Garsten, makes the connection between self-possession and skill in deliberation: “Obama felt it was essential to show that he possessed a distinctive equanimity and cool. Conciliation was his default mode, the dominant strain in his political personality. . . . This had been his way since Harvard when he extended a hand to conservatives even at the cost of disappointing some fellow liberals” (433).

Obama’s ability to imagine accurately and empathetically what it would be like to take various courses of action is what enables him to take up his habitual role as a mediator. Robert Putnam is one among many who comment on Obama’s habit of seeing “common themes in the midst of an arguing bunch. It’s a personal skill or a personality trait,” says Putnam. “I don’t think I have ever seen that same ability in anyone else” (qtd. in Remnick 306). Obama’s disposition for mediation is the source of what Remnick calls his “signature appeal, the use of the details of his own life as a reflection of a kind of multicultural ideal” (360), which he began to articulate during his campaign for the U.S. Senate.

Sugrue argues that it was through his experience of the complexities of race in late twentieth-century America that Obama “discovered his calling. It was to overcome the acrimonious history of racial polarization . . . to act on the understanding that such polarization was anathema to national unity” (54), and he comments that “Obama’s power as an orator is his ability to seamlessly bring together . . . his personal story with a narrative of national redemption” (53). Damasio, among many others, argues that nonconscious and conscious narrative processes provide individuals with a sense of themselves.15 These self-narratives draw on cultural narratives as well as personal memories and meanings. When Obama began his appeal for a new understanding of race by saying that his “is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that
this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one,” he shaped a narrative that aligned his personal identity and disposition with strongly held cultural narratives of American optimism, belief in the inevitability of progress and exceptionalism, and with a common understanding of Martin Luther King as a moderate conciliator and national healer. Sugrue says, “Our conventional histories of King and the Southern freedom struggle reinforce a broader and still deeply held vision of American exceptionalism, one that relates civil rights to a timeless American political tradition, dating back to the founding, of equality and opportunity” (51). Obama’s shaping of this narrative, its intricate synthesis of emotions, dispositions, memories, cultural beliefs, and study of civil rights history, was, again, not the work of a couple of nights of focused thought, but emerged through the complex systems of an individual interacting with his surround.

Like such narratives, the skills that enable a skilled rhetor to realize possibilities for action are often so engrained in the nervous system that their deployment is barely conscious; they prepare—or dispose—a person to act in a certain way in a given situation, and to do so instantly and seamlessly. Miller points to the development of such skills as a dimension of agency, quoting Jeff Walker, who says, “the purpose of declamation is . . . to develop a capacity, a 

dunamis of thought and speech, a deeply habituated skill” (qtd. in Miller 149). This skill can be cultivated consciously, but it also develops through everyday immersion in the surround. Anthony Giddens calls it practical consciousness, skills developed in the process of everyday living that are enacted nonconsciously, though they can be brought to consciousness.

Hubert Dreyfus, following Merleau-Ponty, calls it skillful coping, in which “acting is experienced as a steady flow of skillful activity in response to one’s sense of the situation” (“Intelligence” 378). He describes stages in the process of acquiring skills such as playing chess and driving a car as involving less and less conscious decision making and more and more refined discriminations of situations:

with enough experience in a variety of situations, all seen from the same perspective but requiring different tactical decisions, the brain of the expert performer gradually decomposes this class of situations into subclasses, each of which shares the same action. This allows the immediate situational response that is characteristic of expertise. (“Intelligence” 372)

In skillful coping, Dreyfus argues, “we do not experience our intentions as causing our bodily movements,” but nevertheless our actions can be attributed to us
as agents if two conditions are fulfilled: if we can stop doing what we are doing if we want to, and if our actions are “caused by the gestalt formed by [us] and [our] situation” (“Intelligence” 380; emphasis in the original). Thompson observes that Dreyfus sometimes seems to assume that skillful coping is unconscious, and he argues in contrast that “absorbed action in the world does involve the experience of acting . . . but this experience is usually lived in a prereflective way without becoming the focus of attentive awareness” (Thompson 316).

For example, in using well-worn phrases such as “this nation is more than the sum of its parts,” Obama knew what he was saying, but he needed no deliberate attention to choose his words.

In rhetoric, skillful coping can be equated with kairos. Herndl and Licona argue that “the rhetorical performance that enacts agency is a form of kairos, that is, social subjects realizing the possibilities for action presented by the conjuncture of a network of social relations” (135). Both Debra Hawhee and Janet Atwill analyze kairos as a product of embodied practice. Hawhee quotes Isocrates, whose linking of instruction in the skills of gymnastics and rhetoric parallels Dreyfus’s definition of expertise as involving prereflective discrimination of situations:

again exercise the students and habituate them to hard work, and then compel them to combine everything they have learned, in order that they may grasp them more firmly and bring their notions in closer touch with the occasions for applying them—I say “notions” for no system of knowledge is able to cover these occasions, since in all circumstances they escape our knowledge. (qtd. in Hawhee 84)

Atwill connects kairos with Bourdieu’s notion of embodied art: “not something that one has . . . but something that one is,” something that “makes it possible to appreciate the meaning of the situation instantly . . . and to produce at once the opportune response” (qtd. in Atwill 59).

In this sense, kairos is like nonconscious processes in providing meaning—or rhetorical moves—for free. Obama had developed a lot of rhetorical moves tied to specific situations in previous speeches that he could access without focal awareness in composing this speech. He had positioned himself as a member of what he called the “Joshua generation” in the struggle for racial equality in a speech in Selma in March 2007 at an event commemorating “Bloody Sunday.” Even earlier, at an anti–Iraq War rally in Chicago in 2002, he spoke of the Civil
War as the beginning of the effort “to perfect this union, and drive the scourge of slavery from our soil” (qtd. in Remnick 346). There is no doubt that deliberate crafting went into the construction of Obama’s speech: for example, Favreau reported that they discussed whether to use the story of Ashley and the relish sandwiches at the ending (Remnick 522). But the intention to give the speech, the way to approach the topic of race, and a lot of the content emerged without focal awareness from the self-organizing system that was Obama in March 2008. 

Considering agency as emergent from embodied processes that take place largely without the agent’s awareness may seem both commonsensical and trivial, but it is the way a person becomes who one is, and it provides the motivation for taking responsibility for one’s actions. 

Whether nonconscious or conscious, voluntary actions are clearly intentional, and both the actor and observers “attribute the action correctly to the actor” (Freeman 137). In Freeman’s account, both nonconscious and conscious processes are self-organizing. Consciousness arises out of the interactions of neural populations that create global patterns of shared activity that are integrated by awareness, which, in turn, acts as a constraint on local chaotic fluctuations, just as a thermostat samples and regulates temperature. Consciousness, then, he says, “is the process that makes a sequence of global states of awareness” (135). It comes into play as an action is being concluded and the consequences are being organized and integrated into meaning; this is the learning stage of the intentional arc in which goals are also being reformulated. Consciousness, says Freeman, “holds back premature action and, by giving time for maturation and closure, it increases the likelihood of the expression in considered behavior of the long-term promise of an intentional being” (135–36). I return to discussing the experience of conscious agency, but first I need to address the question of the nature of causation.

**Circular Causation and Persuasion**

As William James and Merleau-Ponty hypothesized and neurological experiments verify, awareness and consciousness do not “cause” action but rather follow and explain, justify, modify, and orient our understanding of our actions.
Accepting that many nonconscious processes contribute to agency is not as difficult as accepting that no agent ever intentionally and consciously causes specific things to happen. Did not Obama persuade at least some of his audience that it is time to reject “a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism”? As Freeman says:

> The attribution of causal agency by humans to other humans is essential for social organization and control, because it is the basis for assigning responsibility, with credit and reward or blame and punishment, individually and collectively. Most of us act in the belief that our actions cause the changes in the world we intend, and that someone or something else causes the changes we do not intend. (130)

We experience ourselves as causal agents, and any theory of agency needs somehow to account for that experience. And we need to hold ourselves and others responsible for what we do.

To address this problem, I refer to the way complexity theory shifts our understanding of the nature of causation. Our common understanding, based in classical physics, is that causation is a linear process in which an agent’s action prescribes a certain result. Complexity theory instead refers to quantum physics to understand causation as a circular process in which an agent’s action perturbs another agent who responds. Maturana and Varela’s process of structural determination exemplifies circular causation as does the process they call *structural coupling*, a process of mutual adaptation that occurs when organisms or systems perturb one another in a prolonged interaction, gradually becoming more attuned to one another (75–80; see Figure 1).

Garsten offers a definition of persuasion that illustrates structural coupling. He argues that the difference between persuasion and indoctrination or brainwashing “lies in the active independence that is preserved when we are persuaded” (7). He explains:

> An orator does not coerce; he merely puts words into the air. In the brief moments of conscious or unconscious reflection that occur while we listen to a sales pitch or a campaign speech, an active process of evaluation and assimilation occurs in our minds. . . . When someone sits back and decides, “All right, you have persuaded me,” he is not merely describing something that has happened to him. In spite of the grammar, he is describing something he has done. (7)

Circular causation is a matter of ongoing perturbation and response, not of cause and effect. Garsten, like Freeman, emphasizes that though the thought processes involved can be both nonconscious and conscious, the evaluation
and assimilation of an orator’s meanings is an active process, an act performed by the listener. Both Obama and members of his audience are agents in the activity of persuasion in the sense that they actively respond to each other’s acts of meaning. This is something Bakhtin also recognized when he said that understanding is response:

> every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. . . . Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. (282)

Coming to an agreement or success in persuasion is a joint enterprise in a sense, but each participant is a separate agent in their actions, the orator who puts words into the air and the listener who evaluates and assimilates the words creating his or her own meaning.

Miller also notes that rhetors cannot by themselves ensure the success of their efforts at persuasion, arguing that postmodern suspicions of the “performing subject as the seat of rhetorical origin, seizing the kairos (capacity) to instigate change (effect)” (145–46) are tempered by powerful constraints on the rhetor, including the audience, communal tradition, and interactivity. She observes, “The rhetor cannot be an autonomous originator and expect to succeed in persuasion—and never could” (146). But she locates agency neither in the rhetor nor in the audience, suggesting that we should “think of agency as the kinetic energy of rhetorical performance . . . positioned exactly between the agent’s capacity and the effect on an audience” (147). Kinetic energy, she explains, is “the deed in the doing, action itself,” and she argues that agency is “a property of the rhetorical event or performance itself” (147). In contrast, I argue that deeds are always done by someone, and replacing the doer of the action, the agent, with an amorphous force like kinetic energy leaves us with no basis for assigning responsibility for actions.

Because we experience our intention to act as a cause and the consequences of our actions as a result, redefining causation as a matter of perturbation and response seems to dilute the notion of individual agency. But as these analyses of persuasion and understanding illustrate, the question of how Obama caused people to believe that a politics that breeds divisiveness is bad for the country or of how Bakhtin caused our understanding of understanding as response rather than as a transfer of ideas makes little sense. What happened is not the
effect of a single action, but is a pattern that develops from the interanimating actions of a multitude of agents. Rhetors—and audiences—are agents in their actions, and they are responsible for those actions, but they are not the sole cause of what happens. Those hearing Obama’s speech actively evaluated his meanings and those who were persuaded assimilated his meanings into the equally complex system of their embodied minds. Obama’s speech was a performance of rhetorical agency: it was a perturbation, an invitation to change beliefs, but it did not cause persuasion to happen. As Obama said in his speech at Howard University’s convocation in 2007, “one man cannot make a movement” (qtd. in Sugrue 135). We attribute causes because of how we experience our intentions and their consequences, but as Freeman concludes, “causality is in the mind of humans” (133).

Like Freeman, psychologist Daniel Wegner acknowledges that we experience ourselves as causal agents, and that this experience is important, not only for social life but also for psychological health (329). Wegner explains that it is the co-occurrence of conscious thoughts about what we will do and our actions that results in apparent mental causation: “we come to think of these prior thoughts as intentions, and we develop the sense that the intentions have causal force even though they are actually just previews of what we may do” (96). Wegner argues that conscious will is an illusion, but a necessary one: it is “a feeling that organizes and informs our understanding of our own agency” (318).

Miller argues that it is agency that is a necessary illusion. It is, she says, an attribution or ideological construct offered in response to Burke’s question at the beginning of the Grammar of Motives: “what are we doing and why are we doing it?” (qtd. in Miller 152–53). But this is just the question that Wegner says the illusion of cognitive will answers, informing us that we have caused something to happen. Our conscious thoughts about what we may do are useful in orienting us to what we are doing, and they do play a role in modifying our intentions and goals, sometimes before we act and certainly afterwards. But conscious will neither causes our actions, nor does it constitute agency. Giddens says that agency “refers to doing” (10); it “concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently” (9). Agency is a matter of action; it involves doing things intentionally and voluntarily, but it is not a matter of causing whatever happened.
Free Will and Responsibility

In the sense that our actions are always our own, we act with free will; agency is grounded in individual embodiment. But by virtue of that embodiment, we also exist in interaction with the surround. Freeman argues that it is the misperception of the biological phenomenon of agency in terms of linear causality that leads to a belief in the impossibility of free will, and he comments: “No intentional action is free of its historical context, nor is it entirely constrained by genetic and environmental determinants. The nature-nurture deterministic dyad . . . fails to take into account the capacity for intentional beings to construct and pursue their individual goals within the contexts of their societies” (138). Understanding agency through the notions of assimilation, structural determination, circular causation, and structural coupling helps explain the co-existence of freedom and constraint in agency, but a more positive understanding of freedom is needed to argue for a notion of responsible rhetorical agency as the foundation of deliberative rhetoric.

When Obama writes that his choices were never his alone, he rejects the notion of freedom as freedom from all constraint. Glen Mazis explains that the latter notion of freedom, the one most often assumed in American popular culture, is “the ‘negative’ moment of freedom . . . [which] does not address what freedom is to be used for—namely to pursue a meaning and purpose in life, which requires commitment and foreclosing one’s options by making choices and seeing them through” (159). But he also argues that the ability to choose one way or another “is not the primary sense of freedom—it comes too late. Choosing between alternatives presupposes a human’s ability to enter into a relationship with the surround in differing ways that give rise to differing senses and therefore differing choices” (159). Mazis traces that ability to the phenomenon of self-consciousness or metacognition, “the awareness of having an experience while in the midst of it—of tacitly recognizing the sense of the unfolding experience without halting it or distancing oneself from it” (158). He says that it is the interweaving of this “dual consciousness,” a “feathered modulation of ‘both and’ or ‘not one, not two’” (158) that he derives from Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the interweaving of the subject and object, that opens a space for new possibilities. He explains:

The freedom here . . . is not the Cartesian will to order the mind in commanding itself to proceed in a certain predetermined line and corresponding behavior but is, rather, the letting emerge from a wider flow of meaning that can expand us in a different kind of direction toward a new relationship. The situation comes to have differing significances and therefore differing possible outcomes. (158)
That differing significances and outcomes arise from shifts in consciousness is widely recognized: Heidegger argued that awareness of things as things in themselves, apart from our everyday interaction with them, arises from a loss of circumspection (107), a breakdown of skillful coping that can interrupt the intentional arc (see Figure 2). Wegner recognizes this phenomenon, too. Explaining that we experience conscious will more often when our thought processes are “inefficient,” he says: “Controlled and conscious processes are simply those that lumber along so inefficiently that there is plenty of time for previews of their associated actions to come to mind and allow us to infer the operation of conscious will” (98). Metacognition, loss of circumspection, and inefficient processes are all conscious—and consciousness-expanding—processes that are, as Mazis explains, at once focused and unfocused; they are a kind of concentrated attention on the beckonings of other possibilities in the brain and in the surround (135–36). The freedom in free will is this openness to different meanings, an openness to “the flow of fresh constructions within our brains and bodies” (Freeman 139) that arises in our interactions with each other and the surround and that, as Mazis says, creates choices.

Openness to other possibilities, to other opinions, to the voices of others, is also essential to the kind of deliberative rhetoric and persuasion for which Garsten argues. He defines deliberation as “a process of drawing upon citizens’ capacity for judgment” (190) and claims that therefore “deliberation requires the opportunity to change one’s mind” (198). Because persuasion is an achievement of the listener, he says that in real persuasion,

> Speakers treat their listeners’ existing opinions with a certain deference, and yet they do not cater to them. This respect for the actual opinions of one’s audience serves to acknowledge the particular features of individuals—their histories, identities, commitments, and needs—in a way that respect for their autonomy does not. It is a respect for what Seyla Benhabib has called “the concrete other” rather than the “generalized other” (198).

Respect for listeners’ opinions, being open even to “unreasonable” opinions, to “troublemakers,” means being open to them as responsive beings who, like the speaker, will understand or assimilate meanings in their own way. It means recognizing both speakers and listeners as agents in persuasion, as people who are free to change their minds. It is this recognition that I argue defines responsible rhetorical agency.

Obama concluded his speech by asserting his conviction that “we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds” and by offering his audience a choice:
we have a choice in this country... We can tackle race only as a spectacle... or in the wake of tragedy... or as fodder for the nightly news. That is an option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, “Not this time.”

For at least some of Obama’s audience, his statement that we had a choice, that we could say “Not this time,” led to a loss of circumspection: it was a statement that broke down habitual patterns of response and offered different possible outcomes, a new line of flight. But for all his audience it was an offer that made clear his respect for their opinions, another disposition for which he is well known. Miller would say that Obama’s statement was an attribution of agency to his audience, that Obama addresses his audience in this way “not so much because of anything they are doing but because he attributes to them the capacity to do something, including attributing agency to him” (150). She argues that “we understand agency as an attribution made by another agent, that is, by an entity to whom we are willing to attribute agency,” and that “it is through this process of mutual attribution that agency does, indeed produce the agent” (150; emphasis in the original). Recognition of an other as someone capable of agency, someone capable of making a difference, is important in persuasion, but rather than creating agency, it is how a rhetor becomes responsible, how a rhetor enables real persuasion. Agency is inescapable: rhetors are agents by virtue of their addressing an audience. They become responsible rhetors by recognizing the audience not only as agents, but as concrete others who have opinions and beliefs grounded in the experiences and perceptions and meanings constructed in their brains.

Maturana argues that the isolation of perception and meaning in the brain entails that no one can “claim to be rationally right through some explicit or implicit pretense of having a privileged access to an objective reality” (96). Responsible agency instead requires one to be aware that everyone acts out of their own space of meaning and that to affirm one’s own meanings as absolute truth is to negate the other person. Maturana says, “If I invite someone to responsible action, I cannot tell him or her what to do. At most I can open the possibility for a reflection together so that we may join in bringing forth a world” (95) in which we can live together. Cass Sunstein, a close friend of Obama’s in law school, when asked about Obama’s legal ideology, said, “with Obama it’s more like Learned Hand when he said, ‘The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right.’ Obama takes that really seriously. I think the reason that conservatives are O.K. with him is both that he might agree with them on some issues and that even if he comes down on a different
side he knows he might be wrong” (qtd. in Remnick 266). Obama said, “we have a choice in this country.” The words he put into the air were an invitation to responsible agency, an invitation to consider other alternatives to a politics of racial division. In concluding his speech with the offer of a choice, Obama emerges as a responsible agent. He strongly argues for the choice he would make, but as has been clear in his actions as president subsequently, he is open to other possibilities. He knows he might be wrong.

In outlining the procedure for forming a good common world, Latour describes a number of skills exhibited by people in various “callings” that can be drawn on. I believe the most crucial of these skills is the one Latour attributes to the moralists, who, rather than knowing what must be done and not done, know instead that no one knows for certain and for all time what must be done (Politics 156). It is the skill of moralists that enables the collective to resist the lure of certainty and of matters of fact and instead to embrace uncertainty and matters of concern by always being open to other voices, other opinions. This is also the skill of responsible rhetors, to be open to and responsive to the meanings of others, to not negate others by insisting that only they themselves own the truth.

Individual agency emerges ineluctably from embodied processes; agency is inescapable for embodied beings. As Rickert says, students in writing classes (like all concrete others) are productive agents already. What we need is not a pedagogy of empowerment, but a pedagogy of responsibility. We need to help students understand that writing and speaking (rhetoric) are always serious actions. The meanings they create in their rhetoric arise from and feed back into the construction of their own dispositions, their own ethos. What they write or argue, as with all other actions they perform, makes them who they are. And though their actions do not directly cause anything to happen, their rhetorical actions, even if they are embedded in the confines of a college class, always have effects: they perturb anyone who reads or hears their words. They need to understand that thus their rhetoric can contribute to the effort to construct a good common world only to the extent that they recognize their audience as concrete others with their own spaces of meaning. If they are not to negate others in this effort, they need to understand their own persuasive acts as invitations, not as affirmations of absolute truth: they need to recognize that they might be wrong. Rhetorical agency is a big responsibility. It means

This is also the skill of responsible rhetors, to be open to and responsive to the meanings of others, to not negate others by insisting that only they themselves own the truth.
being responsible for oneself, for others, and for the common world we construct together.21

Acknowledgments
An earlier version of this article was presented in February 2010 as the Thomas R. Watson Distinguished Visiting Professor Lecture at the University of Louisville, and I thank the members of my seminar, Alicia Brazeau, Carrie Kilfoil, Brice Nordquist, Shyam Sharma, Mike Sobiech, Ryan Trauman, John Vance, Caroline Wilkinson, and Mark Williams, as well as colleagues at Louisville, Debra Journet and Min-Zhan Lu, for their helpful comments. I also thank Kathleen Blake Yancey and the CCC reviewers as well as Cynthia Selfe and Nancy Grimm for their comments on the revised manuscript.

Notes
1. Surround is Mazis’s term, used to suggest that natural environments cannot be distinguished from social ones. Latour argues at length for this position in We Have Never Been Modern, Pandora’s Hope, Politics of Nature, and Reassembling the Social.
2. Although I do not dwell on it here, this definition of agency holds not only for all animals but also for machines, plants, and material objects, though there are differences in how these various beings enact agency.
3. An understanding of phenomena in terms of complex systems is emerging as a new paradigm in composition and rhetoric (see especially Hawk and Syverson) as well as in many other fields. Already a stimulus to new insights about such diverse phenomena as brains, fractals, thermodynamics, software, ecosystems, network culture, and the economy, complexity resonates with and draws on vitalist traditions in rhetoric and philosophy and inspires an understanding of writing as a complex self-organizing system responsive to, but neither designed nor controlled by, writers. Many self-proclaimed scholars of complexity explicitly note their reliance on phenomenological philosophy, especially the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and thus there are many conceptual overlaps between their work and that of humanist scholars influenced by phenomenology.

The idea of complexity is not all that new: it’s not news at all to American Indians and other indigenous peoples who see all life as connected, nor to Eastern philosophies. But the idea also has multiple roots in the history of Western culture. Byron Hawk traces complexity to vitalist philosophy and science, beginning with Aristotle. Walter Freeman traces the notion of brains as dynamic open systems to Aquinas, who was drawing on Aristotle’s understanding of perception as an active process. Fritjof Capra details the emergence of systems theory in the early twentieth century in the Weimar Republic, a culture that was anti-mechanistic
The term **matter of concern** is Latour’s, referring, roughly, to issues, arguments, or crises but emphasizing the range of actors involved as well as the uncertainty of the distinction between facts and values (*Politics*).

5. The term **enactive approach** is Thompson’s, who follows and develops Varela’s earlier definition of **neurophenomenology**.

6. I emphasize that my description of the process through which Obama enacted agency in this speech is not meant to be definitive. An exhaustive analysis of the influences on Obama and of his nonconscious and conscious intentions is probably impossible, nor is it my project here.

7. See also Haraway, who argues for objectivity as “particular and specific embodiment” as opposed to “transcendence and splitting of subject and object.” Haraway argues that by following this approach to objectivity, “we might become answerable for what we learn how to see” (190).

8. Foucault suggests a similar definition of an actor in his discussion of power: in a power relationship the other must “be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts” (220).

9. In assuming the emergent nature of order and change and the circular nature of causation, Latour’s procedure of forming a collective is like complexity theory despite his disparagement of the “sciences of complexity,” which he argues (rightly) in no way guarantee that the difficulties of composing a good common world will be taken into account (*Politics* 270 n4).

10. Latour uses “the good common world” to signify the bringing together of the moral question of the common good and the epistemological question of the common world by ensuring that all propositions, entities, voices, and stakeholders are heard in the deliberations that compose the “collective” (*Politics* 93, 106–7). The good common world is “the best of all possible worlds” (146; emphasis in the original).


12. Though Obama did have assistance from his speechwriter in composing this
speech, I still argue that Obama is the sole rhetor and the agent of its composition and delivery because he had final authority over the text and is held solely responsible for whatever the speech says. The speechwriter, Jonathan Favreau, is also an agent, but his action is like that of an editor who assists in shaping the meanings in the speech; he is not the source of the meanings.

13. When I use the words intention and intentions, I mean them in this sense, as emotions impelling action, not in the phenomenological sense of directedness at an object nor in the sense of socially constructed intentions such as those connected with speech acts.

14. Remnick notes that “a teachable [or teaching] moment” is a favorite phrase of Obama’s (437).

15. See Benson; Bruner; Dennett; Ricoeur.

16. Chess is more often used as an example of rule-governed activity, but Dreyfus is focusing on the acquisition of the strategic skills that makes one into an expert player.

17. Dreyfus draws on Freeman to explain the neurodynamic processes underlying skillful coping; see also his similar argument in “Overcoming.”

18. Obama spoke of the leaders of the civil rights struggle as Moses, who challenged the Pharaoh, and his generation, who stood on the shoulders of those giants, as Joshuas, who would “lead them into a multiracial Canaan” (Sugrue 15).

19. See Freeman, who observes that such awareness can arise from a strong reaction to something amiss in the situation of action (91): for example, an odd expression on the face of a companion interrupts what a person was about to say; and Deleuze and Guattari, who see new lines of flight emerging from destratification, in which the assemblage is gently tipped, revealing “connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities” (161).

20. This contrasts with defining deliberation as ensuring universally acceptable practices of argumentation, as do Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and Habermas, a definition that he argues is based in “a deep suspicion of individuals’ ordinary private judgments and opinions” (Garsten 191).

21. Note that I consider my approach to be neither social constructivist nor cognitivist. When I say we construct ourselves and others and our common world, I mean, following Latour, that we actually do so: our rhetoric, like all our actions, has real effects in the real world; it does not construct an alternate or shadow reality. (For discussion, see the first chapter of Latour’s Pandora’s Hope, “Do You Believe in Reality?”) Also, as I discuss further in a larger project in progress, the conception of rhetoric I offer here is informed by the related notion of an Aristotelian phronetic techne (see Dunne 355).
Works Cited


Marilyn M. Cooper

Marilyn M. Cooper is a professor of humanities at Michigan Technological University. She has published articles in *CCC, JAC, College English, Computers & Composition, Technical Communication Quarterly,* and *Writing Center Journal,* and has published numerous book chapters. She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *The Animal Who Writes,* which will include a version of this essay.

2011 David H. Russell Award Call for Nominations

The National Council of Teachers of English is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Nominations of publications to be considered should be postmarked no later than March 1, 2011. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (i.e., between January 2006 and December 2010) are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Reports of doctoral studies, while not precluded from consideration for the Russell Award, are typically considered as part of NCTE’s separate “Promising Researcher” program. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language.

To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to college@ncte.org: your name, your phone, your email; author, title, publisher, and date of publication for the work nominated; and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. Please include four copies of the publication for distribution to the Selection Committee, or give full bibliographic information so that the Selection Committee will encounter no difficulty in locating the publication you nominate. Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2011, to David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096, Attn: Felisa Mann. Final selections will be announced in mid-August 2011.