

“What Isn’t Rhetoricity?” – Transcript of *Rhetoricity* Episode 1

[papers shuffling]

Eric Detweiler: Pull myself together here—

[*Rhetoricity* theme plays: surf guitar and drums]

[futuristic space sounds]

Diane Davis [with reverberating, ominous vocal effect]: In the beginning was rhetoricity.

[sound of the needle on a record player dropping, space sounds replaced with record hiss]

Detweiler: Well, hello there. This is a recording of the voice of Eric Detweiler, digitized and compressed and coming to you across an array of web servers to introduce *Rhetoricity*, this new podcast. For the sake of convenience, though, you can just call me Eric. [record hiss stops] I’m a PhD candidate specializing in rhetoric at The University of Texas at Austin and an assistant director in UT’s Digital Writing and Research Lab. But enough about me—what about you? You, if you’re still listening, probably know a thing or two about rhetoric. Even so, you might be wondering, “what is rhetoricity?” Well—it’s complicated, and there’s a reason that the question posed by this episode’s title is “What *Isn’t* Rhetoricity?” More about that in a minute, though. In the meantime, I’ll say this: it’s a term I’m lifting from Diane Davis, a rhetorical theorist and—full disclosure—my dissertation advisor. [jazz bass plays] As she puts it, rhetoricity is

[quoting from p. 2 of Davis’s *Inessential Solidarity* with a telephonic vocal effect] an *affectability* or *persuadability* ... that is the condition for symbolic action. [percussive shaker joins bass] I get how this sounds, but I’m not going mystical or even particularly abstract on you here. By definition communication can take place only among existents who are given over to an ‘outside,’ exposed, open to the other’s affection. [telephone effect and music end]

So while rhetoric often focuses on persuasive encounters, situations, or strategies, rhetoricity emphasizes the conditions that make persuasion possible—not the rhetorical power or agency of a masterful communicator, but the vulnerability, the openness and feeling of exposure that have to be in place for any attempt at persuasion to unfold. Rhetoricity emphasizes not the individual speaker or writer, but the web of relations that has to be in place before that individual ever has something to say or someone to talk to. And not only the relation to other people, but to language itself. So what *isn’t* rhetoricity? Here’s Davis. [jazz bass and shaker resume]

Davis: Rhetoricity is not an art or a science. Rhetoricity is not conditional, which is to say it doesn’t depend on anything at all—except finitude. There is no sovereign rhetoricity. Sovereignty is an absolute immunity to otherness, closed up in itself and self-sufficient. There would be no rhetoricity among sovereign beings. Finitude, at least since Heidegger, names an irreducible opening-out or exposedness to the other, to whomever or whatever comes. A finite being gathers itself together for the purpose of responding to the other whose call precedes its

identification with itself. Responding to this call is, again, not voluntary or optional, so that when we talk about a rhetoricity without sovereignty, we're talking about an unconditional rhetoricity, in which the origin or quasi-origin of any finite identity, any "I," *is* its response to the other. The "I" is granted in response. [music fades]

Detweiler: But you don't have to take our word for it. Let's get some other voices in the mix here. I asked a few other people around the Digital Writing and Research Lab to weigh in on rhetoricity.

Steven LeMieux: This is Steven LeMieux, take one.

[uptempo electric piano music plays]

Detweiler: Steven, whose dissertation draws connections between rhetoricity and the parasite, links rhetoricity to the way French philosopher Jacques Derrida talks about hospitality.

LeMieux: And so when Diane describes rhetoricity as a preoriginary affectability or persuadability, it makes me think of Derrida in *Of Hospitality* and how he talks about windows and doors, and that the home is always already ready for the guest. There's always already a way in. And so I want to think about rhetoricity in a similar manner.

[music fades]

Detweiler: Like the house, the rhetorical subject is constituted by its doors and windows—which aren't just a way of looking out at the world, but a way for others to get in. Otherwise, what would a house be? In his dissertation project, Steven also thinks about rhetoricity in terms of interruption.

[electric piano returns with electronic percussion loop]

LeMieux: Another thing I kind of want to ask—we'll see if I can get there: Diane talks about the address as always interruptive—

[high-pitched beep indicating a new take]

Davis: Rhetoricity is not symbolic exchange or some sort of persuasive discourse—

LeMieux: —interrupting a—

[beep]

Davis: —nor is it an effect of meaning or symbolicity in the typical sense, since it precedes and exceeds both.

LeMieux: —it interrupts an—

[beep]

Davis: Rhetoricity is not simply natural or innate. It's not an identifiable attribute or property. But neither is it simply conventional. It's always relational, but it precedes any elective relation.

LeMieux: I forgot where I was going with that.

[beep]

Davis: Rhetoricity is not voluntary; it's not a power nor is it a function of power. It doesn't exist in the realm of the masterable possible, in the realm of the "I can."

LeMieux: It interrupts the fantasy of agency, I think is what she says. If, again, I think about it in terms of Derrida's doors and windows, can I look at rhetoricity already as an interruption, that the very possibility of affectability is already an interruption? [music fades]

Detweiler: Meanwhile, Will Burdette—

[reggae guitar begins to play]

Will Burdette: Hey folks! Will Burdette here. I work on the rhetoric of food.

Detweiler: —draws connections between rhetoricity and fermentation, a process he focuses on in the third chapter of his dissertation. He quotes Sandor Katz—

Burdette: —aka Sandorkraut, the fermentation guru.

[quoting with telephone effect] We are each an ecosystem. The human body is host to an elaborate indigenous biota. Some geneticists argue that we're a composite of many species, with a genetic landscape that encompasses not only the human genome, but also those of our bacterial symbiotes. In fact, not only are we composed of bacteria. We are outnumbered by them. Bacteria outnumber the cells containing our unique DNA by more than ten to one.

So the fact that we're more bacteria than human is kind of shifting the way that we think of ourselves.

Detweiler: Will links this up with a point made by—

Burdette: —godmother of posthumanism Donna Haraway. She says, [telephone effect] "It's become literally unthinkable to do good work in any interesting field with the premises of methodological individualism and human exceptionalism. What we're turning toward," [telephone effect stops] if we're turning away from humanism, according to Haraway, is [effect resumes] "an understanding that we are all multi-species, and we're becoming-with." [effect stops, music fades]

Detweiler: So for Will, rhetoricity isn't just about rethinking the rhetorical relationship between people, but the ways that even the bacteria in our guts influence and interrupt any pure notions of human agency or individuality.

Burdette: [guitar music resumes] And, you know, there's even some evidence coming out now that our microbiota can affect our human behaviors, that it can trigger certain cravings for certain kinds of foods, that it can in some ways persuade us to do things or eat things. [music fades]

Detweiler: Will draws a connection to “Autozoography,” a recent article by Diane, in which she riffs on Carl Linnaeus, a famous botanist and “the founder of modern scientific taxonomy.” Linnaeus pointed toward the capacity for self-knowledge as the immaterial thing that makes humans different from other animals and other forms of life. You know, that ability to bend your finger back and point it at yourself and say, “I am who I am.” [jazz bass plays] But near the end of her article, Davis writes that [telephone effect] “it is not simply that there is something ‘immaterial in man’ from which self-knowledge arises ... but that this immaterial something, this preordinary rhetoricity, is the very condition for the identity and functioning of *any* living being,” [effect and music end] from Will's microbes, to the parasites that Steven talks about, to the magpies and dolphins addressed in Diane's article, to—yes, humans, or whatever else we might want to call the collections of bacteria and water and parasites and skin cells that we are, that we share classrooms and workplaces and sidewalks with. What *isn't* rhetoricity?

And, at least for the sake of this podcast, I'm interested in what rhetoricity isn't not just in terms of the wide range of living beings and topics it might allow students and scholars of rhetoric to attend to. I'm also interested in the sort of performances it might ask for. I don't know about you, but listening back to my own recorded voice makes me feel deeply uncomfortable in a way that looking back at words I've written just doesn't. And conducting interviews, which will be a substantial part of this podcast going forward, leave me feeling much more vulnerable, open, and exposed than writing an essay does. Writing often leaves me feeling so much more in control than interviewing someone, even that control is just a fantasy. And this is something I was reminded of when I asked Kendall Gerdes to talk through some of her thoughts on rhetoricity.

[sad, disjointed jazz music and lo-fi interview audio fade in]

Detweiler: [snaps to test mic levels] Okay, Kendall: so what *isn't* rhetoricity?

Gerdes: [silence]

Detweiler: You can go ahead whenever.

Gerdes: [silence]

Detweiler: You gonna say anything? [pauses, sighs]

[music and lo-fi audio fade]

Detweiler: So the title of this podcast is *Rhetoricity*, and the title of this episode is “What Isn’t Rhetoricity?”, because I’m—not sure? I don’t know. I can’t even! What I *do* know is that rhetoricity is bound up with feelings of vulnerability and openness that I myself will be feeling as I put this podcast together, even if its subject matter occasionally strays back into the realm of rhetoric. I’ll do my best to play with the limits of rhetoric, rhetoricity, the podcast as a medium, and what topics and affects are allowable in the realm of what’ll be an at least somewhat scholarly undertaking. And I’m sure I’ll fail and end up doing some very conventional stuff, but hey: failure’s part of the name of the game here! So forgive me, because here it is: the *Rhetoricity* podcast. Check back soon for interviews with rhetoric, writing, and digital media scholar Jenny Rice and media theorist and psychoanalyst Laurence Rickels. Hear me ask prominent scholars about their work and about awful things they’ve done in the past! [drum part of *Rhetoricity* theme fades in] I will likely humiliate myself! Look me up on Twitter @EricSDet—that’s E-R-I-C-S-D-E-T—if you’ve got ideas or suggestions! That’s *Rhetoricity*, folks! Or maybe it’s not?

Davis: [voice echoing and reverberating] The “I” is granted in response. In the beginning was rhetoricity.

[*Rhetoricity* theme plays]