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# For the Love of Rhetoric, with Continual Reference to Kenny and Dolly

Joshua Gunn

*Few contemporary scholars have explicitly discussed the relationship between love and rhetoric. This essay draws on the insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis to argue that rhetoricians have been reluctant to theorize love for two reasons: first, it is already implied in the widely accepted concept of identification; and second, any explicit discussion of love tempts kitsch. Once we understand love and kitsch as homologous constructs, it is argued, we are better able to engage rhetoric more directly as a form of love or, alternately, as a form of deceit.*

*Keywords:* Deception; Invitational Rhetoric; Irony; Kitsch; Love; Stupidity

Islands in the stream/That is what we are  
No one in between/How can we be wrong  
Sail away with me to another world  
And we rely on each other uh huh  
From one lover to another uh huh

—Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton, “Islands in the Stream”<sup>1</sup>

Although the Bee Gees originally penned “Islands in the Stream” as an R&B single for Diana Ross, they awarded the ditty to Kenny Rogers who subsequently released it as a country duet with Dolly Parton in the summer of 1983. Had the song remained a rhythm and blues disco-dance number, it is still likely that it would have made it into the *Billboard Top 100* list, yet its chicken-fried version by Kenny and Dolly catapulted the tune into the pop and country cross-over stratosphere, earning both artists

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another number one spot on the *Billboard* pop chart and the Gibb brothers recognition by BMI as the authors of the most licensed song of 1984.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the Country Music Television cable channel hailed “Islands in the Stream” as the “greatest country duet” of our time.<sup>3</sup> The irony of the success of “Islands in the Stream” is that the tune is also roundly recognized today as one of the worst pop songs ever, now a kitschy favorite at karaoke bars across the country and a handy cultural reference for a superficial and naive kind of love.<sup>4</sup>

I open this essay with reference to Kenny and Dolly’s pop-love for two reasons. First—and technically speaking—the opening lyrics are among the stupidest ever penned in the name of love: “Baby, when I met you there was peace unknown/I set out to get you with a fine tooth comb.” Such a sentiment is like telling one’s lover that s/he was discovered much like one does fleas on a dog or the hidden evidence of a crime scene. Yet the idiotic lyric quite literally represents what love often does to us: it renders us dumb, it pushes us to the limits of representation, it pushes us almost to speechlessness. Love is thus the name for a special kind of stupidity. Certainly Kenny and Dolly’s sentiment, written for rhyme as much as meaning, is stupid in a more mundane sense, yet there is a way in which the lyric registers the frequent effect of love as something that makes us trip over ourselves, stutter, or fall into a thorny hedge posturing in front of a desired lover.<sup>5</sup> “Islands in the Stream” is thus doubly stupid.

Although the fine-toothed quest for love makes for good fun-poking, it is also symptomatic of a powerful conception of love that resides in the popular imagination: the love of *pure identification* through complete and total knowledge of another. Searching for one’s lover with a precise instrument characterizes love as an examination, or as a search for the hidden secrets of another, an obsession with his or her intricate details. Let us call this neurotic love or, better, the love of interrogation—a love intensely focused on the beloved as an object of scrutiny.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, a second reason I’ve opened with reference to Kenny and Dolly is that “Islands in the Stream” reflects the soul-deep desire to escape death in the arms of an all-knowing beloved. It is not coincidental that the song’s title is the same as a lesser-known Hemingway novel about a lonely, hard-drinking man in search of himself and reconciliation with his lover. Perhaps for Kenny, Dolly, and Ernest, “islands in the stream” evokes the seventeenth meditation by John Donne, who, upon hearing a bell tolling softly for another recognized the bell also had a message for him: in working through the way in which the deaths of others portend our own, Donne wrote, “[N]o man is an island, entire to itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”<sup>7</sup> Is this not Kenny and Dolly’s sentiment and the secret wish of Hemingway’s protagonist? “Islands in the stream/That is what we are/No one in between/How can we be wrong?” Although Kenny and Dolly’s understanding of “the main” is *prima facie* more isolationist than Donne would prefer, it suggests the lovers identify themselves as islands connected by a total knowledge of the other and the common substance of love. “Islands in the Stream” thus presents love as a transcendent unification through total identification (viz., finding a “soul mate”).

As Kenny and Dolly’s ditty helps to demonstrate both deliberately and by accident, transcendent identification and stupidity are two rhetorical dimensions of love

that have unfortunately been neglected by communication scholars. Of course, ancient Greek thinkers like Gorgias and Plato had plenty to say about love and rhetoric, but in contemporary rhetorical scholarship, the most widely read and well-known theories that might be said to link them are only threefold. The first is Wayne Brockriede's suggestion that rhetors adopt the ideal of "arguers as lovers," which entails a mutual respect for one's interlocutors and a valuation of the relationship over the outcome of rhetorical encounters.<sup>8</sup> The second is Jim Corder's call for understanding "argument as emergence" within an overarching ethic of accommodation such that we better understand why "rhetoric is love."<sup>9</sup> The third is Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin's "invitational rhetoric," a paradigm that opposes a presumed agonistic link between patriarchy and persuasion with a feminist posture of hospitality.<sup>10</sup> Although these approaches share an interest in love, they ignore love's stupidity and (presumably) seem to abandon the metaphysical promise of identification and spiritual transcendence that underlies the entrenched "soul mate" view.

In the decade since Foss and Griffin introduced the invitational paradigm, however, theories of love have become increasingly common in the theoretical humanities: beginning with *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks has written numerous books on love, becoming one of its most visible contemporary theorists.<sup>11</sup> In her influential *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver has called for imagining "love beyond domination" and a new ethic of "response-ability."<sup>12</sup> Even Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "the world-renowned authors of *Empire*" who are known more for their celebration of the "new barbarians" and the agonistic uprising of "the multitude," have argued that "a concept of love is just what we need to grasp the constituent power of the multitude."<sup>13</sup> Yet despite what appears to be a larger theoretical trend in humanistic scholarship,<sup>14</sup> few rhetoricians have endeavored to develop Brockriede's and Corder's propositions,<sup>15</sup> and neither has the invitational view been elaborated beyond what some scholars see as a relatively facile and misguided rejection of agonism.<sup>16</sup>

Are rhetoricians reluctant to take the "turn to love" that has been made in the theoretical humanities? I think so, and this essay endeavors to explain why, with continual reference to Kenny and Dolly. More specifically, in this essay I argue that rhetoricians have failed to theorize love for two interrelated reasons.

First, love has been avoided in theoretical discussions because it is already the assumed dynamic underwriting persuasion; love has been indirectly theorized already in terms of identification and the transcendent promise of unification. I suggest that this is demonstrable in the widely taught concepts of "identification," "division," and "consubstantiality" derived from the work of Kenneth Burke. The dominant idea of persuasion as the creation of identification or other-knowledge over some common, shared substance is the implied love theory of rhetorical studies, and to theorize rhetoric's love better I argue that we must reconceptualize identification as an iteration of love.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, I argue that rhetoricians have avoided theorizing love because of the stupidity it necessarily entails. More specifically, we

have avoided discussing love because of its close proximity to naive idealism or “kitsch” in Western culture—to speak of love in theoretical scholarship (or at least in work that does not concern literary art or film) risks being thought of as Kenny and Dolly are today (trite and cheesy).<sup>17</sup> Originally understood as artwork that is worthless, pretentious, and overly sentimental, kitsch is a German concept that has gradually come to denote something that covers over or hides an unpleasant truth.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as the dominant fantasy of love in the West is, in fact, the impossible ideal of transcendent unification (e.g., “You complete me,” or, “No one in between/How can we be wrong?”), to invoke love in theory necessarily tempts kitsch. Hence, we have been afraid to approach love as a theoretical endeavor because we do not quite know how to reckon with its idiotic dimension, that part of love that makes us stutter or shudder. It is also in this respect that dismissals of Brockriede’s and Corder’s calls, or criticisms of Foss and Griffin’s invitational paradigm as “utopian,” are akin to the cynical repulse of gaudy Valentine’s Day decorations: both rhetorical theories of love and red cardboard hearts are criticized for attempting to cover over, deny, or disguise the ugly truth of human alienation, aggression, and evil. Any theorization of the relationship between love and rhetoric must consequently address love’s stupid, utopian intimation or risk immediate repudiation.

In order to explain how rhetoric assumes love, and how this assumption tempts kitsch, I proceed in three parts. First, I explain Lacan’s understanding of love as a (stupid) fantasy of unification and then compare it to Kenneth Burke’s theory of persuasion as identification. Understood in relation to what Lacan terms the *objet a*, identification concerns a gesture toward an elusive but tantalizing “something more” in others that represents the promise of transcendent love. Once the tacit connection between persuasion and love is made explicit, I then turn to an explanation of kitsch in the second part of this essay. A comparison of the well-known duet by Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton to the paradigm of invitational rhetoric shows how both are homological representatives of a transcendent idealism better described as kitsch. I conclude in the third part of this essay by arguing that a rhetoric of true love entails an embrace of kitsch and stupidity and reckons with the ontological dualism that grounds rhetorical studies in a reduction of love to its true and bare, minimal, formal relation: irony.

### On the One (On One)

What constitutes the basis of life, in effect, is that for everything having to do with the relations between men and women, what is called collectivity, it’s not working out. It’s not working out, and the whole world talks about it, and a large part of our activity is taken up with saying so.

—Jacques Lacan<sup>19</sup>

In what is perhaps his most famous seminar of 1972 and 1973, Lacan elaborated what was to become his most well-known arguments about love.<sup>20</sup> According to Lacan, the enigma of love has endured for centuries because humans have trouble admitting that it is “not working out,” and so we talk about the possibility of its

working out endlessly, as idiots, dumb before the truth. Like Gibb's opening lyric in "Islands in the Stream," love renders us stupid because we cannot speak about it without sounding silly.<sup>21</sup> As easy as it is to find popular music that blindly asserts the possibility of a transcendent love in the idiom of idiocy, it is also just as easy to find a recognition of Lacan's seemingly cynical assertion: from the Main Ingredient's 1972 gold single "Everybody Plays the Fool" to Leo Sayer's classic "Fool for Your Love," love's stupid dimension is well acknowledged—or, as the J. Geils Band would have it in "Love Stinks," flatly rejected! Yet despite the fact that at some level we acknowledge that it is not working out, the stupidity of love is allowed to continue. As Avital Ronell explains,

There is an undeniable pleasure seeking in the empire of the idiotic, a low-burning delight in stupid behavior and activity. One needs only to be reminded of the pleasure domes of the stupid by which constructed delights are dosed out. . . . Does one really need to be reminded of watching embarrassingly stupid shows on TV, vegging out, cultural studies . . . when is the prohibition on stupidity lifted and when, finally, can one be stupid? When you're in love, for instance. When you call each other by stupid names, pet names, summoning declensions of your own private idiolect in amorous discourse. Love indicates one of the few sites where it is permitted publicly to be stupid.<sup>22</sup>

"Islands in the Stream," of course, presumably represents the publicization of a private amorous idiolect, a song once received—as Steve Perry of Journey once sang—with open arms, but now recognized as the musical benchmark of stupidity.

Given Lacan's hard line against the possibility of love working out, Dylan Evans suggests that it "might seem surprising that Lacan himself dedicates a great deal of his seminar to speaking about love."<sup>23</sup> Yet he does so for a number of reasons that are encapsulated in Lacan's statement that the "only thing that we do in analytic discourse is speak about love."<sup>24</sup> First, the babble of the therapeutic setting between the analyst and analysand is always about relationships with others, since subjectivity as such emerges in childhood (usually between the child and the mother, then with the introduction of another parental figure).<sup>25</sup> Second, even though love cannot be talked about, the impossibility of doing so motivates our (somewhat foolish) attempts to do so; in the Lacanian register, motive as such is a reaction to some absence or "lack." Third, stupidity denotes a state in which we are not (fully) aware of what we are saying, and something speaks from us beyond us (*viz.*, the subject of the unconscious), like the line about the "fine toothed comb" in Kenny and Dolly's tune. In clinical practice, psychoanalysis works through transference to produce stupidity—that is, the short-circuiting of full consciousness and rationality—that leads to insights about one's self and one's analyst. In this respect "stupidity" is not always a bad condition, but the proviso of love that leads to potential insight.<sup>26</sup> Finally, and most importantly, love is the center of analytic discourse because it denotes a fundamental, structural truth to human subjectivity that we stubbornly repress: "the truth, the only truth that can be indisputable because it is not, that there's no such thing as a sexual relationship."<sup>27</sup>

*There is No Sexual Relationship*

Beginning in the early seminars and until the very last, Lacan insisted on the fundamentally illusory character of all forms of love—brotherly, erotic, and spiritual.<sup>28</sup> Although courtly love represents one of the most visible fantasies of love, love as such references a fundamental ontological disjunction between two kinds of experiences in the world (e.g., “subject positions”). In this respect love is a supplement, not an affect.<sup>29</sup> For Lacan love is a “function” or a consequence of a radical disjunction between two people.<sup>30</sup> “What makes up for the sexual relationship is,” notes Lacan, “quite precisely, love.”<sup>31</sup> Although we associate affect with this thing love, the thing as such is the epiphenomenon of an *impossible* relationship; to speak of it is a reminder that I am not you, and that you are not me—that, in fact, there is no relationship between us, only endless symbolic reminders of that impossibility. When speaking of Lacan on love, argues Alain Badiou, “it is necessary to keep the pathos out of passion, error, jealousy, sex, and death at a distance. No theme requires more pure logic than love.”<sup>32</sup> The name for the logic of love is “disjunction.”

So, what do we mean, then, by disjunction? Musically, a disjunction is a shift in the notes of a melody. In logic, it designates the function of the term “or” that leads to truth statements. And then there is the disjunction of informal logic, which implies “one or another.” What seems common to these uses of the term is that disjunction implies an absolute choice between two things, a fundamental binary. For Lacan, there is a fundamental binary choice made for us at birth: either you are a man or you are a woman. You had no choice in this decision, and once it is made (e.g., by your parents, by a doctor, by “society”), you cannot undo it.<sup>33</sup> In other words, for Lacan sexual difference is ultimately a positioning in the symbolic between two categories of experience; it is a “logic” that Lacan terms “sexuation.”<sup>34</sup> Lacan’s logic of sexuation does take biology into account, but can only do so by means of language.<sup>35</sup> It is important to underscore, however, that this forced choice is *not* determined by one’s biology, for it is entirely possible to change one’s biological sex (and the mutability of the body, or the parasitic nature of the symbolic, is a topic that interests Lacan).<sup>36</sup> Even when one elects to do so, as is the case when one attempts to resolve gender dysphoria via sexual reassignment (i.e., transsexuality), it is almost impossible to escape the symbolic tokens of the choice that was made for you. Because for Lacan real sexual difference (i.e., gamete-identified sex) is approached via the symbolic, the idea that there is no sexual relationship implies a fundamental disjunction between two categories of experience that *cannot overlap or relate with one another in the symbolic*.

Of course, Lacan’s statement that there is no sexual relationship seems *prima facie* absurd. “Sure there is a sexual relationship,” readers may be thinking. What is key here, however, is the equivocation with the word “sex”: the act of physical intercourse marks the supposed unification, or Oneness, of each sex. In other words, “sexual relationship” denotes both the cultural fantasy of the unification of two souls, as well as the possibility of a conjunction between the two sexes.<sup>37</sup> For Lacan, the experience of man and the experience of woman do not overlap, but are wholly distinct from

birth to death. Consequently, the disjunction cannot be known directly.<sup>38</sup> So, when Lacan says that there is no sexual relationship, he means both that the experience of the sexes, and by extension people in general, are radically disjunct, and that sexual intercourse is not a practice whereby two become one in the act.<sup>39</sup> The former meaning is more important; however, the impossibility of this relationship is why love and sexual intercourse are frequently commingled, if not outright confused—why both meanings of “sex” are implicated in the same logic. That there is no sexual relationship means not only that the “male” experience cannot be the “female” experience and vice versa, but also that sexual intercourse is frequently a means by which individuals attempt to overcome their radical disjunction. One is tempted to think that this much is obvious; however, any viewing of *Divorce Court* or, as is likely, any recounting of one’s own romantic past (especially that of one’s teenage years) quickly reveals that it’s not working out but we keep trying anyway. Hence, “what makes up for the sexual relationship is, quite precisely, love.”<sup>40</sup> Love is the token of a failure of reconciliation. Love is failure. *Love is the impossibility of becoming One.*

### *The Gesture of Something More*

When we understand that love is the supplement of a failed or impossible relationship, then we can begin to decipher courtly or romantic love as a kind of deception in a way that directly implicates rhetoric as it is traditionally received in U.S. rhetorical studies. Falling in love is a dumbness toward the impossibility that another person can “complete me” or “make me whole” by recognizing me, by knowing me through and through, by identifying with my soul. In this respect, Lacan asserts, “as a specular image, love is essentially deception.”<sup>41</sup> For Lacan love is *specular* because it involves a kind of narcissism (as if looking into a mirror): “It’s one’s own ego that one loves in love.”<sup>42</sup> Yet for love to be love, someone must be reciprocally narcissistic. “To love is, essentially, to wish to be loved,” and it is this reciprocity that distinguishes love from drive (which requires no other).<sup>43</sup>

Why, however, is this specular image essentially deceptive? Lacan answers that love is deceptive because it involves a promise to “give what one does not have.”<sup>44</sup> In love one makes a gesture toward something more, a something that is impossible or that does not really exist. As the deceptive promise to give what one does not have, love thus concerns the “paradoxical, unique, specified object we call the *objet a*,” an object that provokes the idea that there is something more to one’s lover than the lover him- or herself, something “beyond” them that Lacan explains is the fundamental dynamic behind psychoanalytic treatment: “the analysand says to his partner, to the analyst, what amounts to this—I love you, but because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the *objet petit a*.”<sup>45</sup>

For Lacan, the *objet a* (variously *objet petit a* or “little object a”) concerns desire, which for Lacan is distinct from love: desire is the affective structure we tend to associate with love, and love is a supplement to disjunction, an illusory fantasy of unity.<sup>46</sup> Love and desire are homologous structures, both in terms of their impossible satisfaction and in relation to that object which betokens “something more,” this *objet*

a. Describing love's deception vis-à-vis this "something more" is especially significant for rhetoric, for it explains the fundamental link between persuasion and love: persuasion is the promise that a rhetor/lover can somehow produce the *objet a*. In this regard, all rhetorical appeals concern what I term the "gesture of something more," but which has typically been termed by rhetoricians as identification. To explain better the *objet a* and its relation to identification, it is helpful first to explain the foundational concept for all emotional appeals in Lacanian psychoanalysis: desire.

Whenever we are concerned with the gesture of something more—the deceptive promise that I have the power to produce something more in me than me for you—we are in the domain of desire. Kenny and Dolly's lyrics, "You do something to me that I can't explain/Hold me closer and I feel no pain," signals this inexplicable something that is beyond each of them and that stimulates their desire for each other. For Lacan, desire must be understood in relation to the *objet a*, which is its cause, and in strict distinction from two related forms of human motivation: need and demand. Human need refers to, more or less, basic biological needs (e.g., food, shelter, and so on). Demand refers to a request for something (an object, an action, a gesture, and so on) from another human being; ultimately demands are for love. As Joan Copjec explains, the distinction between need, demand, and desire orbits the status of the object that is requested or that sets motives into motion:

On the level of need the subject can be satisfied by some *thing* that is in the possession of the Other. A hungry child will be satisfied by food—but only food. . . . It is on the next level, that of demand, that love is situated. Whenever one gives a child whose cry expresses a demand for love, a blanket, or food, or even a scolding, matters little. The particularity of the object is here annulled; almost anything will satisfy—as long as it comes from the one to whom the demand is addressed. Unlike need, which is particular, demand is, in other words, absolute, universalizing.<sup>47</sup>

Demand thus represents a push for something more from another rather than a particular object (as any object will do)—something paradoxically tantalizing but unattainable. When the person making the demand begins to realize that this something more is impossible to describe or to get, she transitions from demand to desire (e.g., "You do something to me that I can't explain"). For Lacan, desire is a continual pulsation of motivating energy; the object that stimulates desire, the *objet a*, cannot be possessed or desire would cease. Insofar as it involves the fantasy of unity, love is another name for a demand that, once one is self-conscious of it, becomes a desire set into motion by the *objet a*, this unpossessable, indescribable something always associated with a particular person (e.g., readers who consider themselves "in love" might try to specify what, precisely, it is that they desire about their lovers; it is an impossible charge). It is in this sense that love betokens the gesture of something more, something more in one's lover (or mother) than the lover him- or herself.

Of course, sexual desire is the most familiar and conspicuous form of desire stimulated by various objects. As Dolly's (in)famous pulchritude reminds us, the woman's breast is a (perhaps *the*) classic sex object that also can function as an *objet a* that often ends up in the mouth of a woman's lover. Now, unless one is truly perverse

in the clinical sense of the term, the point of sucking a breast is *not* to get or possess it (e.g., by literally eating it), but precisely the opposite: one sucks and licks and teases the breast to pleasure one's partner and stimulate one's own desire for the something more in the breast than the breast. Becoming sexually aroused by the sight or touch of a woman's breast has to do with what breasts *are not*. Significantly, Copjec explains that desire is kept in play precisely because the *objet a* is unattainable: "the Other retains what it does not have and does not surrender it to the subject."<sup>48</sup> Love is thus not only the supplement to an impossible or failed relationship, but it also concerns the demand and/or desire set into motion by the *objet a*. Love is fundamentally deceptive, then, because it is a kind of false promise: in courtship, the lover makes the gesture of something more, that s/he can do the impossible and produce the *objet a*.

### *Burkean Identification as Love*

Thus far love has been described as, first, a supplement to a failed relationship, or the name we give to the impossibility of overcoming a fundamental disjunction between two experiences in the world; and second, as a persuasive gesture of something more, or as an emotional appeal whereby someone causes the desiring of another by the tacit or explicit promise to produce the *objet a*. The significance of this twofold understanding of love for rhetorical studies is that it is fundamentally a theory of persuasion: rhetors are literally lovers, promising audiences a coming unity (to "make them whole") and stimulating their desire for that unity with various substitute objects: an end to their suffering and loneliness, a re-united union, better welfare reform, a war "to show 'em that we can do it," and so on.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Lacan's understanding of love helps us to redescribe the persuasive process as desirable, but also as necessarily deceptive (and, with regards to Nietzsche, in a non-moral sense): insofar as the *objet a* is merely the label for this excessive "something more" to a person betokened by a substitute object (e.g., the breast, a voice, whatever it is about a rhetor that appeals to us), any pretense to satisfying the desires of an audience is a ruse. Not only is it impossible to produce the object cause of desire, but, as Lacan insists with his claim that there is no sexual relationship, it is also impossible to unite an audience or a people "as One." As Lacan puts it, "love is impotent, though mutual, because it is not aware that it is but the desire to be One, which leads to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between 'them-two.'"<sup>50</sup> Alternately stated, this desire to be One is the underlying logic of persuasion as transcendent unification, a promise that only works, of course, if one is "stupid" enough to believe, consciously or unconsciously, that a rhetor has this impossible power. From this vantage, our received understanding of persuasion in rhetorical studies is fundamentally idealist, or, rather, premised on the transcendent fantasy of spiritual unification by erotic means—sexual union with a soul mate.

The transcendent ideal of persuasion is perhaps no more explicitly extended than in the widely studied work of the Mac-Daddy of modern rhetorical studies, Kenneth Burke. In *A Rhetoric of Motives* Burke argued that the default condition of all persuasion is "identification," which helped to eclipse a centuries-long obsession with

rational argumentation and deliberation. "Here is perhaps the simplest case of persuasion," explains Burke. "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his."<sup>51</sup> Yet for Burke identification is not merely the flattery of walking and talking like a duck when among ducks; rather, one is persuaded by another because of a deep-seated desire to become "as One," a desire cued by some common substance: speech, gesture, tonality, and the like. "Consubstantiality," argues Burke, is a condition of persuadability that is only possible because "identification implies division."<sup>52</sup> Rhetoric is thus implicated "in matters of socialization and faction," or in the processes of subjectification and human conflict, which implies that identification or states of consubstantiality are the consequence of some prior alienation or division.<sup>53</sup> Burke treats this division as fundamentally biological, for as Barbara Biesecker explains, "prior to the identifications and divisions of rhetoric, there is the biological division of one nervous system from another."<sup>54</sup>

At this juncture the parallels between Lacan's understanding of love and Burke's understanding of rhetoric begin to emerge. First, insofar as love is a supplement for an impossible sexual relationship, rhetoric is the promise of unity through consubstantiality; rhetoric is thus the supplement for what Burke terms division, or, rather, the impossibility of pure consubstantiality *because* of a default disjunction. The key difference between these two understandings of persuasion concerns essentialism: For Lacan disjunction is wholly a symbolic relationship, a kind of logic, irrelevant of biology or any other essentialist facticity; one simply must fiat an unbridgeable gap among subjects in the world, a gap that cannot be *thought* or *known* precisely because the experience on either side will never overlap.<sup>55</sup> Love is thus both a failure to reckon with this disjuncture and a (if not the) response to this disjuncture. For Burke, however, division is fundamentally biological, the fact that human beings are neurologically discrete entities; rhetoric thus becomes the way in which these separate neurological beings "induce cooperation" through representation (of course, such a view has essentialist implications for understanding sex and gender).<sup>56</sup> Second, insofar as love's desire is caused by an object that betokens a something more, identification is the promise that this mysterious and elusive X can, in fact, be produced. Consubstantiality is thus a term for a state of desiring, a longing for the something more of a persuasive, attractive, or charismatic individual.

From a Lacanian perspective, Burke's understanding of identification comes very close to collapsing love and rhetoric. He probably did not do so—at least explicitly—because he objected to the psychoanalytic characterization of human motivation in sexual terms.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, as Diane Davis has argued, Burke's theory of identification is unquestionably founded on the desiring subject.<sup>58</sup> As with Lacan, Burke agrees that it is "of the essence of man to desire," and this is because of a division (or disjunction) central to subjectivity.<sup>59</sup> Burke also seems to suggest that persuasion is a desirous event:

*implicit in the perpetuating of persuasion . . . there is a need of "interference." For a persuasion that succeeds, dies. To go on eternally (as form does) it could not be*

directed merely toward attainable advantages. And insofar as the advantages are obtainable, *that* particular object of persuasion could be maintained as such only by interference. Here, we are suggesting, would be the ultimate rhetorical grounds for the tabus [sic] of courtship, the conditions of “standoffishness.”<sup>60</sup>

Such an understanding of persuasion is similar to Lacan’s explanation of desire: a desire that attains its object is not desire, but simple need. Desire desires only more desire, which is why various substitute objects come into play: for the toddler, her cries for candy are not really for candy, but for the something more that the candy represents: love, the recognition of a parent. Hence for the candy-crazed child, substitute objects will work. In the state of Burkean consubstantiality, then, the object of common substance is necessarily a ruse: the speech, gesture, tonality, image, and so on that invite feelings of desire and that create the conditions of identification are actually forms of “interference” analogous to a love interest who is playing hard to get.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, like Lacan, Burke downplays the object of identification in his account of persuasion by urging a focus on form: the ultimate human motive or cause of human effort should be located

in a *form*, in the persuasiveness of the hierarchic order itself. And considered dialectically, prayer, as pure beseechment, would be addressed not to an *object* (which might “answer” the prayer by providing booty) but to the *hierarchical principle itself*, where there is an answer implicit in the address.<sup>62</sup>

The missing link between Lacan and Burke in this respect, however, is quite literally a person: whereas for Burke persuasion is ultimately understood abstractly as desirous repetition (form),<sup>63</sup> for Lacan *an individual* always gets in the way, or a person is usually mistaken as the cause of the pleasures (and pains) of form.<sup>64</sup> So why did Burke remove the object—a synonym for another person—from his understanding of persuasion, replacing it with an abstraction?

Although Burke is correct to point out that the presumed object of desire is ultimately interchangeable with something else (and thus the common substance of identification is really a ruse), persuasion necessarily situates *an individual* person into the field of desire as a representative of the so-called hierarchical principle (perhaps Burke’s equivalent to Lacan’s “Big Other”). The reason has everything to do with feelings and a fundamental distinction that Freud made between affect and representation in the clinical setting. Bruce Fink explains:

If we hypnotize a patient, we can elicit all kinds of representations from him . . . but often nothing changes. When we wake him up from hypnosis, he remembers nothing more than before, and the symptoms that seem to be tied to those events very often remain intact. It is only when the patient is able to articulate his history and *feel something* at the same time . . . that change occurs. Representation without affect is thus sterile. . . . Affect is rarely brought into play without the presence of another person to whom one addresses all these thoughts, dreams, and fantasies [in analysis].<sup>65</sup>

In short, personal change, and therefore persuasion, requires affect, and affect usually requires people, not principles. To replace the role of another person with an abstract principle is thus to remove desire from the equation of persuasion, leaving us with an

idealist theory of rhetoric that cannot account for affect. Consequently, Burke's understanding of persuasion as identification is paradoxically a theory of love that has—to put things somewhat righteously—lost that loving feeling.<sup>66</sup>

Insofar as Burke is among the most widely read and influential theorists of rhetoric in our time, a theory of (loveless) love is already tacit in the shift from rational deliberation, the supplication of good reasons, and so on, to the study of persuasion as identification, thereby expanding the process into the domain beyond conscious awareness. Hence, one of the reasons few rhetoricians have attempted to theorize love is because it is already assumed. After Burke helped to crystallize the transition from rational argument to courtship, the default understanding of rhetoric—although certainly not in name—became the promise of love (transcendent unification). The evidence of this homologous relation is discernable, of course, in the only two modern essays that explicitly claim love in the name of rhetoric. Both Brockriede and Corder tease out of rhetorical theory how our understandings of the processes of persuasion are tacit theories of love advancing an islands-in-the-stream ideal: cooperative identification via interpersonal encounter in the medium of rhetoric. For example, Brockriede argues that there are three types of rhetors: rapists, seducers, and lovers. Both rapist and seducer manipulate the other through coercion or trickery, irrelevant of the humanity of their targets. The lover, however, treats her counterpart as an equal, values the relationship over the outcome of what is said, and is willing to risk self-esteem in the promotion of a loving and cooperative rhetorical encounter. Similarly, drawing on the work of Carl Rogers, Corder argues the ideal of persuasion should take as its model the therapist–client relationship, in which both parties are “accepting, understanding, and helping the other.”<sup>67</sup> By shifting our view of persuasion from competition and agonism toward accommodation, abandoning “authoritative positions,” and remaining “open” to the other, we will come to recognize that “rhetoric is love, and it must speak a commodious language, creating a world full of space and time that will hold our diversities.”<sup>68</sup> As with Burke, Brockriede and Corder situate rhetoric as a relational bond that transcends difference through identification.

What a Lacanian vantage adds to these approaches is not only an explanation of how human desiring animates the fantasy of love; it also critiques an incipient idealism. Lacan's views on love provide an account of the impossibility of a truly loving rhetoric: insofar as love is the representative for failure, a supplement that makes up for the impossibility there could ever be an understanding between two persuaders, the promise of rhetoric is functionally illusory. Indeed, rhetoric is a supplement of the failure to communicate, understood here as an absolute understanding of shared meaning between two different people. Traditionally conceived, rhetoric is the promise of a false love—a deception. Consequently, Brockriede is wrong to locate deceit only in terms of the rapist and seducer: love is the biggest lie of them all, and rhetoric rides its false promise.

That love underwrites contemporary rhetorical theory is not reason enough for the lack of theorizing; something else lurks, something that Burke's reluctance to embrace the Freudian libido, not to mention his eclipse of the Other with the hierarchical

principle, seems to suggest. In “Arguers as Lovers,” Brockriede sheds light on this something else when he reasons that we have neglected the study of the *people* engaged in persuasive argument, largely in favor of examining “evidence, forms of reasoning, fallacies, forms of refutation, and the like,” and that this neglect has something to do with the taboo of affect and “psychology”:

One sometimes reads an explicit statement that this state of affairs [the presumed irrelevance of studying the people who argue] is desirable to avoid falling into the pit of a debasing psychological analysis. Why debasing? What is debasing about realizing that one of the proper studies of any human transaction is a psychological analysis of the people who are doing the transacting?<sup>69</sup>

Apparently the claim that “psychological analysis” was *prima facie* debasing to rhetorical studies was obvious to readers of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in the 1970s (indeed, a number of scholars have documented the bias against psychology and psychoanalytic approaches in rhetorical studies).<sup>70</sup> Curiously, however, Brockriede *never* explicitly answers his own question, but boldly moves on to specify his threefold typology of attitudes. Is the fear of psychological or psychoanalytic approaches to rhetoric the final answer, then, or is there something else? I think we catch the whiff of yet another answer wafting through one of the responses to Corder’s essay. Elizabeth Ervin argues:

When the talk turns to love, things immediately move out of the realm of reasonable consideration and into sentimental soft focus or visceral cynicism. . . . I’ll admit, the first time I read . . . [Jim Corder’s] essay ‘Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love’ I largely dismissed it as too touchy-feely.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps we are reluctant to talk about the love of rhetoric, the love *behind* rhetoric, because it invites us, as Les Claypool once sang, to “sail the Seas of Cheese.”<sup>72</sup>

### **Them-Two, or, Love is Shit**

*I give myself to you*, the patient says again, *but this gift of my person*—as they say—*Oh mystery! is changed inexplicably into a gift of shit*—a term that is also essential to our experience.

—Jacques Lacan<sup>73</sup>

Speaking of cheese, let us return once again to the amorous dialect of Kenny and Dolly for a second set of lyrics: “I can’t live without you if the love was gone/ Everything is nothin’ if you got no one/And you did walk in tonight/Slowly loosen’ sight of the real thing.” Aside from the grammatical improprieties, here we are reminded of Harry Nilsson’s cultural truism that one is the loneliest number, which, of course, Lacan would suggest is actually the truth of “them-two” and which I have suggested is the foundational drive of persuasion. The last verse—which is sung by Dolly—also adds “sight of the real thing,” cuing an understanding of love as the power of the *objet a* to set desire into motion. In the imaginary scenario of the song, Kenny is the “real thing” for Dolly in two senses: first, in the mundane sense insofar as he is a real human being, a person Dolly believes that she loves; and second, in the

psychoanalytic sense that a glimpse of Kenny—that observing something more about him, his voice, his well-groomed beard, his smooth and gentle gestures—stimulates her desire. For Lacan, the singular *objet a* that sets off desire is in fact a “real thing” insofar as it resides in that part of human experience that he refers to as “the Real.”<sup>74</sup> In the fantasy of “Islands in the Stream,” the mundane real (“I love Kenny!”) runs cover for an encounter with the Real (“Kenny and I cannot become One”); again, the *objet a* cannot be produced or obtained, and neither can two human beings transcend their singularity to become One. Rehearsing Lacan’s understanding of the *objet a* as token of the Real is thus important for understanding the love of rhetoric as both an impossible ideal and a screen for an unbearable truth.

According to Lacan, for humans there are three basic modes or “orders” of human experience: the symbolic, or that order concerned with representation and language, broadly construed; the imaginary, or that order concerned with imagery, illusion, and fantasy; and the Real, an undifferentiated and unsymbolizable realm of being, alternately understood as a void, gap, or “persistent traumatic kernel” in the symbolic order itself.<sup>75</sup> Although Lacan seems deliberately unclear about his conception of the Real (perhaps in order to emphasize its elusiveness), the concept took on increasing importance over the course of his writings. Slavoj Žižek has suggested that one approaches the Real in respect to the *objet a* as a sort of non-existent touchstone, which “is simultaneously the pure lack, the void around which the desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, *and* the imaginary element which conceals this void, renders it invisible by filling it out.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, the *objet a* resides in the Real but has imaginary effects (e.g., inspires fantasies of love). Insofar as love is both the term for a failed relationship and the desire set into motion by the *objet a*, it is simultaneously an indirect confrontation with the Real *and* an inability to reckon with the Real, the promise of unification as an imaginary shield from a Real impossibility. In this peculiar sense, one can argue that love is for shit, or, more succinctly, that *love is shit*.

### *Love Stinks, or, Shit and the Second Tear*

Of course, there is some deliberate equivocation with the term “shit.” With the phrase “love is shit” I mean to denote first that the Western fantasy of transcendent love is “for shit,” meaning that love is impossible to actualize and a valueless pursuit. I also mean to cue the more negative assessments of love for those among us who have failed, time and time again, to sustain a loving relationship in a more mundane sense of the term (“Love stinks! Yeah yeah!”). In this respect—cloacal ambiguities aside—one could say that “Islands in the Stream” is pure bullshit. Most importantly, I mean to stress here the understanding of love as a fantasy animated by the desire *caused* by an *objet a*, an object “without properties that lacks existence.”<sup>77</sup> Insofar as that object is identified as such, it becomes, as Lacan suggests, “the gift of shit,” a worthless thing that loses its value because it has become a specific something. The *objet a* is a token of the Real because it is something non-representable, which is directly experienced as

terrible or horrible by human beings. Hence, for Lacan the “*objet a* is the anal object” in the

precise sense of the non-symbolizable surplus that remains after the body is symbolized, inscribed into the symbolic network: the problem of the anal stage resides precisely in how we are to dispose of this leftover. For that reason, Lacan’s thesis that animal became human the moment it confronted the problem of what to do with its excrement is to be taken literally and seriously: in order for this unpleasant surplus to pose a problem, the body must already have been caught up in the symbolic network.<sup>78</sup>

Shit is a reminder that there is a horrible, unsymbolizable excess or gap in our symbolic reality—that something always eludes us. The frustration we experience over that which eludes us is related to Milan Kundera’s assertion that the objection to shit “is a metaphysical one,” and its register is the imaginary:

The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of Creation. Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don’t lock yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner. It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called *kitsch*. “Kitsch” is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century. . . . Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative sense of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.<sup>79</sup>

And here Kundera causes us to confront the reason why rhetoricians have avoided theorizing love: love’s object is an impossible excess, a form of kitsch not unlike the fantasy that “Islands in the Stream” bespeaks.<sup>80</sup>

If falling in love is a stupidity with respect to a radical disjunction, a ruse of identification with respect to an *objet a* that screens us from the unacceptable in human existence, then our failure to theorize rhetoric’s love is born of fear. Traditionally conceived, love is kitschy, but few of us want to confront the lovers cooing on a park bench, for it would mean reckoning with the impossibility of realizing our own transcendent fantasies. Even fewer of us want to be thought of as sentimentally stupid, or, as Kundera might put it, few of us want to be caught crying in public: “Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running in the grass!”<sup>81</sup> Burke’s reluctance to mention love and his tendency to abstract persuasion to a hierarchical principle depersonalizes rhetoric in an effort to avoid sentimentality. Although few would voice an objection in print, unquestionably some scholars worry that Brockriede’s suggestion that the loving rhetorician “wants power parity” is a pipe dream. Ervin’s admirably frank admission that Corder’s arguments for rhetoric’s love are too “touchy-feely” and cast in “sentimental soft focus” reflects the same fear. Perhaps no other essay, however, has been more roundly criticized for its tears than Foss and Griffin’s “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric.” An

understanding of the interrelation between love and kitsch not only helps to explain the visceral responses to Foss and Griffin's theory, but also helps us to discern better a major fault-line yet to be negotiated by rhetorical theorists: whether or not identification requires division.

### *Invitational Rhetoric as Kitsch*

Drawing heavily on the bio-essentialist work of Sarah Miller Gearhart, Foss and Griffin argue that for centuries rhetoric has been construed as persuasion, which they suggest is a patriarchal enterprise geared to dominating the minds, bodies, and lives of others. Although they stop short of disowning the necessity of appeals for change, they propose invitational rhetoric as a "feminist" alternative to persuasion:

Invitational rhetoric is an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others' perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives.<sup>82</sup>

Invitational rhetoric has many similarities to Brockriede's arguers-as-lovers ideal and Corder's understanding of persuasive encounter as a loving dialogue; all three, for example, strive toward understanding and value the relationship over what is accomplished in words. Foss and Griffin's perspective is nevertheless distinct because rhetors "refuse to impose their perspectives" on others by inviting them to see the world from the rhetor's eyes. "Invitational rhetoric offers an invitation to understanding," they argue, "to enter another's world to better understand an issue and *the individual who holds a particular perspective on it*."<sup>83</sup> Whereas Brockriede and Corder seem to maintain a polite respect for the other, Foss and Griffin advance a theory that seems designed to transcend the self into the Other. Although love does not appear in their essay, invitational rhetoric is the most extreme iteration of rhetoric as transcendent unification: first one invites, then she unites. The dominant concept of identification assumed in Brockriede's and Corder's theories is thereby completely bypassed by Foss and Griffin as a patriarchal conceit.

A number of scholars have criticized Foss and Griffin's theory of invitational rhetoric. Julia T. Wood has charged that the authors have misrepresented feminism as a monolithic perspective and rhetoric as a coercive practice.<sup>84</sup> Bonnie J. Dow has argued that their perspective is needlessly essentialist and biologicist.<sup>85</sup> Dana Cloud has criticized invitational rhetoric for its "problematic assumptions of liberal individualism," namely, that it "assumes shared interests between oppressor and oppressed, so that conflicts can be solved through mutual invitation."<sup>86</sup> All three critics condemn invitational rhetoric for its stance against conflict and struggle, which have been crucial for the social changes that made the West better for women (and men). The world has been an inhospitable place for women, they argue, and the invitational paradigm thus functions as a denial of shit by excluding the unacceptable from its purview. In this respect the individual liberalism of invitational rhetoric has

been criticized as kitsch: invitational rhetoric aims toward an impossible unification at the same time as it denies the ugliness of human existence.

Owing to their reliance on the work of Gearhart, Foss and Griffin's invitational paradigm is unquestionably rooted in biological essentialism. However, understanding invitational rhetoric as kitsch also implies that it is a theory of love, and I would argue one of the first theories in rhetorical studies to challenge the division or agonism central to the traditional rhetorical subject. If we think of invitational rhetoric as a theory of love, then the absolute—if not evangelical—rejection of control and domination is not so much a biologically essentialist position as it is an anti-Hegelian one.

At the heart of the received understanding of identification in rhetorical studies is a Hegelian notion of recognition that we can get at indirectly by recourse to Lacan's theory of desire. For Lacan, one's "desire is the desire of the Other," which means, on the one hand, that I want to *be* the object of your desire, and, on the other hand, that I want you to recognize me (oh, dearest reader!). Many commentators have noted that Lacan's theory of desire was strongly influenced by Kojève's famous 1933–1939 lectures on Hegel, which advanced the argument that

[d]esire is human only if one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other . . . that is to say, if he wants to be "desired" or "loved" or, rather, "recognized" in his human value. . . . In other words, all human, anthropogenic Desire . . . is, finally, a function of the desire for "recognition."<sup>87</sup>

This understanding of desire is most famously played out by Hegel in terms of the so-called master–slave dialectic, of course, but one discerns it also in Lacan's theories of looking, the gaze, the mirror stage, the master's discourse, and so on. Desire is a desire at some level for recognition from another who represents the Other. And, insofar as love is an essentially deceptive, specular image, it concerns the false perception of recognition—a *misrecognition* that another desires me and can produce the *objet a* and make me whole. For this reason, identification as transcendent unification is figured in the visual field as a given rhetor's ability to recognize an audience, to reflect a given group's self-image. Although the recognition of identification is to be understood metaphorically, the metaphor is nevertheless resolutely visual.

In her masterful study of the subject of the theoretical humanities, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Oliver critiques the visual metaphors of subjectivity theory and argues that Hegelian notions of recognition are inherently agonistic. She explains that

contemporary theory is still dominated by conceptions of identity and subjectivity that inherit [this] Hegelian notion of recognition. In various ways, these theories describe how we recognize ourselves in our likenesses as the same or in opposition to what is (or those who are) different from ourselves.<sup>88</sup>

For Hegel subjectivity is a consequence of self-consciousness, and self-consciousness is only possible through awareness of a "not-me," an other or another, by means of re-presentation. So, for example, psychoanalysis posits that subjectivity emerges when a child comes to the realization that it is not one with its mother. When a child

beholds herself in a mirror and jubilantly says, “That’s me!” she is also saying “I am not my mama.”<sup>89</sup> Insofar as the (mis)recognition of another objectifies him or her *as an object* (hence the subject/object relation), Oliver argues that such (mis)recognition is inherently agonistic.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the Hegelian subject is one that comes into being via negation and (mis)recognition: “me” begins with “not-me.” Like Burke’s views on hierarchy and identification, theories that conceive of the subject as beginning in “not me,” such as those of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, Oliver says, “maintain that social oppression and domination are manifestations, or repetitions, of the oppression and domination at the heart of subjectivity itself.”<sup>91</sup>

If rhetoric concerns a Hegelian subject, then it is inherently deceitful; if, however, rhetoric concerns a subject that begins in some pre-symbolic unity, then we can speak of *true* love.<sup>92</sup> Only by making it a critique of the traditional rhetorical subject can we begin to rehabilitate invitational rhetoric. Cast as a theory of love, invitational rhetoric is an attempt to break out of the perceived straitjacket of identification, which, for Burke, is the *recognition* of consubstantiality with another person or people because of some prior division (biological, symbolic, or otherwise). For Brockriede and Corder, rhetoric as love is an attempt to reverse this default alienation by finding common cause or interest. I would argue that Burke, Brockriede, and Corder assume from the outset a Hegelian subject for whom self-reflection is the (mis)recognition of a “not-me” or division among people. For Foss and Griffin, however, invitational rhetoric only makes sense when we supplement it with a positive ontology of prior unity, beginning not with division, but with some pre-linguistic relate-ability, responding to the “objection to shit” with an objection to the agonism assumed to be central to subjectivity itself. Consequently, invitational rhetoric would reject the Lacanian understanding of love as well, replacing it with some pre-representational or pre-rhetorical form of identification (or perhaps not identification at all insofar as identitarian logic is premised on same and different).<sup>93</sup> For rhetorical studies, the stakes of kitsch are thus the stakes of love, and, as Lacan maintained, both concern a way of seeing, a way of singing: were the islands in the stream of speech connected to “the main” before the speech came rolling down? Or are the islands only self-consciously that because of the speech that flows between them?

### The Irony of Love, or, On (Not) Working Out

Love, a metonymy of community, was itself ironic—or irony, truly, is love—which is to say that it preempts the exchange of self-identical rings . . . and is based, rather, on the unrepenting recognition of difference, separateness, and . . . nonunderstanding. Exorbitantly summoning the infinite at the limit of finitude, love, no matter how “free,” is irony. There is no such thing as a free love.

—Avital Ronell<sup>94</sup>

“Islands in the Stream” begins in the key of division; by the end of the song, however, the lyrics shift to denying there ever was a divide. The song ends with a promise from Dolly built on a foundational, ontological unity: “No more will you cry/Baby, I will hurt you never/We start and end as one, in love forever.” For Kenny

and Dolly, love is thus a sing-song recognition of some pre-symbolic unity that I have suggested provides the basis of Foss and Griffin's theory of invitational rhetoric. Using Kenny and Dolly's duet as an allegory for rhetorical theory, however, I have also argued that the dominant theory of love concerns transcendent unification by means of identification, ultimately understood as a neo-Hegelian form of recognition based on a fundamental (biological or otherwise) division. Drawing on the work of Lacan, I have argued that identification is fundamentally a lie: the gravity or pull of love is the promise that a rhetor can conjure unity or make one "whole" though the production of an impossible-to-produce object, the *objet a*. Understood as the process of recognizing consubstantiality, rhetoric is consequently a theory of love—a *false* love or kitsch, to be more precise. The dominant understanding of rhetoric is thus a symptom of an inability to reckon with, and a response to, the shit of Creation.

I want to bring this essay to a close by underscoring where the recognition of the love of rhetoric takes us: to the question of subjectivity and the heretofore cherished concept of identification. Davis has argued that identification "is not simply rhetoric's more fundamental aim; it's . . . rhetorical theory's most fundamental problem."<sup>95</sup> Coming to terms with the love of rhetoric is one way to address—as opposed to solve—this fundamental problem, implicating two directions in which theory might go.

First, following the work of Oliver and the path originally forged by Foss and Griffin, we might begin to rethink the rhetorical subject through a new metaphor of seeing as "connection" or mediation, which obviates or at least significantly modifies our understanding of identification:

From a new conception of vision as connection, notions of recognition and subjectivity are transformed. If space is not empty, then vision does not have the impossible task of crossing an abyss between the subject and the world of others. Subjects do not have to be motivated to control the world in order to compensate for their separation from it. If the abyss is an illusion, so is the need to dominate objects that lay always on the other side.<sup>96</sup>

For Oliver, seeing as connection is fundamentally an ontology of true love based on a non-representational consubstantiality. Like the recent work of Luce Irigaray, Oliver argues for a conception of subjectivity that is neither lacking nor alienated but rather fundamentally connected, like Kenny and Dolly in a stream of song.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Davis has argued that identification "surely does not depend on shared meaning" because, as neurological evidence bears out, a "mimetic rapport precedes understanding, affection precedes projection."<sup>98</sup> The gulf or gap between two people or a rhetor and audience assumed by rhetorical theory—indeed, the abyss central to the notion of "communication" itself—simply does not exist, and consequently, the love of rhetoric—a good or true love—would concern "an a priori *affectability* or *persuadability*" that is previous to and in excess of any shared meaning.<sup>99</sup>

If one thinks that the anti-Hegelian approach of Oliver and others tempts kitsch (and precisely because it seeks to avoid the second tear by cutting out crying altogether), then a second direction for theory is toward a reconceptualization of identification not only as love, but also as a particular form of dualism. With a

little help from Lacan (and with the option of changing my mind), this is the direction that I advocate at the moment. Although embracing dualism is not very fashionable in the theoretical humanities these days, rhetoric's tacit theory of love assumes a mismatch between minds and bodies, as well as *a priori* alienation (division), so we might as well come clean (about our shit). If one accepts that love makes up for a radical disjunction between two or more individuals who will never truly relate, then rhetoric is borne aloft by the promise of a coming relateability that never arrives, both the lie of invitation and persuasion and the screen from a terrible, horrible void that eludes symbolization. Like love, rhetoric traditionally conceived is fundamentally a false promise.

Recognizing deceit as the affective basis of persuasion, however, does not mean that rhetoric is unnecessary or that we can avoid—or even would want to avoid—our bad love. A false promise does not equate to a false hope. There is also a sense in which understanding rhetoric's love is a reckoning with alterity, or, as Ronell puts it, “an unrepenting recognition of . . . nonunderstanding.”<sup>100</sup> Accepting the love of rhetoric, and therefore the neo-Hegelian subject this love assumes, requires the embrace of irony and the comic frame—communication as shared meaning and love as unification are homologous and impossible.<sup>101</sup> Embracing rhetoric's love is akin to stupidly singing “Islands in the Stream,” full-throated and passionately, at the local karaoke bar. Even deceit can bring us much joy, for it is the logic of what many term “fun.” Sometimes rhetoric's love produces a better smelling deodorizer. And sometimes the speech of stupid fools and idiotic lovers changes the world.

## Notes

- [1] Barry Gibb and Maurice Gibb, “Islands in the Stream,” on *Eyes That See in the Dark*, performed by Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. Castle Music, 1983. Compact disc.
- [2] “Islands’ Honored as Top BMI Song; WB Leads Pubbers,” *Variety*, June 20, 1984, 57.
- [3] Craig Shelburne, “Islands in the Stream’ Named Greatest Country Duet,” *CMT.com*, January 2008, [http://www.cmt.com/shows/dyn/greatest\\_series/91715/episode\\_featured\\_copy.jhtml/](http://www.cmt.com/shows/dyn/greatest_series/91715/episode_featured_copy.jhtml/).
- [4] For examples of the sentiment, see Roy Kasten, “Blond Ambition: That Titanic Contradiction Dolly Parton is a Whore, a Saint, a Poet and a Preacher Disguised as a Dumb Blonde Country Girl,” *Riverfront Times*, August 21, 2002 <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/2002-08-21/music/blond-ambition/>; and John Nova Lomax, “The Dirty Thirty; The Worst Songs of All Time from Texas,” *Houston Press*, April 29, 2004 <http://houstonpress.com/2004-04-29/music/the-dirty-thirty/>. The contemporary reaction is doubly ironic, for as I go on to argue, the song is regarded as kitsch precisely because hearers secretly identify with its transcendent concept of love as spiritual unity; see Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, With Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 50–52.
- [5] See Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 89.
- [6] Perhaps the most famous theory of the love of interrogation is that of Jean-Paul Sartre, who characterized love as a strategy to undermine another by knowing him or her thoroughly, both “biblically” and intellectually. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), esp. 474–93. For an excellent overview of theories of love from the ancient Greeks to

- present-day thinkers, see *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991).
- [7] John Donne, "Meditation 17," *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1924), <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/meditation17.php/>.
- [8] Wayne Brockriede, "Arguers as Lovers," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 5 (1972): 1–11.
- [9] Jim W. Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love," *Rhetoric Review* 4 (1985): 16–32.
- [10] Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 2–18.
- [11] bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William and Morrow, 2000); bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2002); and bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001).
- [12] Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), esp. 217–24.
- [13] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 351. See also Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Nicholas Brown et al., "'Subterranean Passages of Thought': *Empire's* Inserts," *Cultural Studies* 16 (2002): 193–212.
- [14] Also see Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity within History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996); Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček (New York: Continuum, 2002); Heidi Bostic, "Luce Irigaray and Love," *Cultural Studies* 16 (2002): 603–10; Judith Hamera, "I Dance to You: Reflections on Irigaray's *I Love to You* in Pilates and Virtuosity," *Cultural Studies* 15 (2001): 229–40; and Della Pollock, "Editor's Note on *Performing Love*," *Cultural Studies* 15 (2001): 203–5.
- [15] See Jay VerLinden, "Arguers as Harassers" (paper read at the 86th annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Seattle, WA, November 9–11, 2000), <http://sorrel-humboldt.edu/~jgv1/me/harassers.html/>. For recent work that touches, however indirectly, on the relation between love and rhetoric, see Jeremy Engels, "Disciplining Jefferson: The Man within the Breast and the Rhetorical Norms of Producing Order," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9 (2006): 411–35; Eugene Garver, "The Rhetoric of Friendship in Plato's *Lysias*," *Rhetorica* 24 (2006): 127–46; and Dave Tell, "Beyond Mnemotechnics: Confession and Memory in Augustine," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39 (2006): 233–53.
- [16] Dana Cloud, "Not Invited: Struggle and Social Change" (paper read at the 90th annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 11–14, 2004); Nina M. Reich, "Invite This! Power, Material Oppression, and Social Change" (paper read at the 90th annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 11–14, 2004); and Julia T. Wood, "The Personal is Still Political: Feminism's Commitment to Structural Change" (paper read at the 90th annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 11–14, 2004).
- [17] See Elizabeth Ervin, "Love Composes Us (In Memory of Jim Corder)," *Rhetoric Review* 17 (1999): 322–23.
- [18] Or, as Milan Kundera eloquently puts it, kitsch "is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence." *The Unbearable Lightness of Being: A Novel*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: HarperCollins/Perennial Classics, 1999), 248. Also see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "kitsch."
- [19] Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 32; hereafter cited as *Book XX*.
- [20] Lacan, *Book XX*.
- [21] Lacan, *Book XX*, 17.
- [22] Ronell, *Stupidity*, 89.

- [23] Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 103.
- [24] Quoted in Evans, *Introductory Dictionary*, 103.
- [25] See Charles Shepherdson, *Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. 115–51.
- [26] See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essay in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), esp. 3–19, 102–41; and Ronell, *Stupidity*.
- [27] Lacan, *Book XX*, 12.
- [28] The illusory character is directly related to its position in the imaginary, and, hence, it is fundamentally a narcissistic structure. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 186, 253, 268. Hereafter cited as *Book XI*.
- [29] Lacan, *Book XX*, 86. “Fantasy” is a technical term in Lacanian psychoanalysis that refers to structures that coordinate our desires, and should not be confused with the more popular understanding of fantasy as “fancy.” Not all fantasies are illusory; love is an illusory fantasy because it is impossible. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 3–44. Also, I mean “supplement” in the Derridian sense fetched from Rousseau; see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 141–64.
- [30] The term “disjunction” is Badiou’s. My reading of Lacan on love is heavily informed by Badiou. See “What is Love?” in *Sic 3: Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 263–81. Also see Daniel Cho, “Lessons of Love: Psychoanalysis and Teacher–Student Love,” *Educational Theory* 55 (2005): 79–96.
- [31] Lacan, *Book XX*, 45.
- [32] Badiou, “What is Love?” 266.
- [33] This “choice” is a paradoxical one: “We can see . . . that anatomy does not determine the destiny of eros,” says Colette Solar, “even though for every speaking being it is an *a priori* handicap: in other words, there are males and females according to civil status who are not men or women as sexuated beings, hence the choice.” Obviously as post-operative transgenderism makes plain, one can undo the choice in a sense; one cannot, however, undo the “handicap.” See Colette Solar, “The Curse on Sex,” in *SIC 3*, 42.
- [34] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 98.
- [35] See Geneviève Morel, “Psychoanalytical Anatomy,” in *SIC 3*, 28–30.
- [36] See Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 289–90; and Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 158–59. Space limits any thorough discussion; however, it should be noted that for Lacan sexuation is a process of identifying with, or not identifying with, phallic *jouissance*.
- [37] For a helpful explication, see Badiou, “What is Love?” 266–67.
- [38] Badiou, “What is Love?” 267.
- [39] It is possible for some to conclude that my extension of the heterosexual binary to “people in general” is a heteronormative move. What Lacan would stress, however, is that all difference (e.g., race) is based on this fundamental binary; it is only through the symbolic differentiation of “male” and “female” that we first learn of difference. Consequently, Lacan’s remarks on love still apply to same-sex difference: the yearning for the One, although established in a binary disjunction, begins with a fundamental distinction between one and then another. For a discussion of a similar pickle, see Bostic, “Luce Irigaray and Love,” 603–10.
- [40] Lacan, *Book XX*, 45.
- [41] Lacan, *Book XI*, 268.

- [42] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 142. For readers familiar with Lacan's three registers, love is, in fact, situated in the imaginary order; however, it has effects in the symbolic.
- [43] Lacan, *Book XI*, 253.
- [44] Evans, *Introductory Dictionary*, 103. The phrase is from Lacan's eighth seminar on the topic of the transference, which has yet to be translated into English.
- [45] Lacan, *Book XI*, 268. To this phrase Lacan adds, "I mutilate you," which I have excised for simplicity. The idea here is that in loving that quality or element "in you more than you," in a sense your person, body, and so on become mere *objects* for me to get at this "something more." In loving, then, I disfigure my love to resemble something she is not; I mutilate him.
- [46] Strictly speaking, love is born of demand. For a clear and helpful discussion of the distinctions between need, demand, and desire, see Philippe Van Haute, *Against Adaptation: Lacan's "Subversion" of the Subject; A Close Reading*, trans. Paul Crowe and Miranda Vanker (New York: Other Press, 2002), 103–25.
- [47] Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 148.
- [48] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 148.
- [49] Casey Spooner, Jimmy Harry, Susan Sontag, and Warren Fischer, "We Need a War," on *Odyssey*, performed by Fischerspooner. Capital Records, 2006. Compact disc. For a more detailed explanation of this argument see Joshua Gunn, "Hystericizing Huey: Emotional Appeal, Desire, and the Psychodynamics of Demagoguery," *Western Journal of Communication* 71 (2007): 1–27.
- [50] Lacan, *Book XX*, 6.
- [51] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 55.
- [52] Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 45.
- [53] Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 45.
- [54] Barbara Biesecker, *Addressing Postmodernity: Kenneth Burke, Rhetoric, and a Theory of Social Change* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 46; also see Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 130.
- [55] Slavoj Žižek's latest book is devoted to explaining the character of this gap. See *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).
- [56] Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 43.
- [57] See, for example, Kenneth Burke, "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision: The Rout of the Esthetes; Literature, Marxism, and Beyond," in *Extensions of the Burkeian System*, ed. James W. Chesebro (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), esp. 103.
- [58] Diane Davis, "Identification: Burke and Freud on Who You Are," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38 (2008) (in press).
- [59] Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 275.
- [60] Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 274.
- [61] "[B]iologically it is of the essence of man to be sated," says Burke. "Only the motives of 'mystery' . . . are infinite in their range, as a child learns from himself when he first thinks of counting to the 'highest number.'" Such counting is the measure of desire. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 275.
- [62] Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 276.
- [63] See Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968; originally published 1931), 29–44.
- [64] Perhaps the more provocative claim is that Burke's hierarchical principle is Lacan's Big Other, although length constraints prevent making the argument. Regardless, Burke is guilty of ignoring the disposition of the people in a rhetorical encounter, which is the opening corrective of Brockriede's "Arguers as Lovers" essay.
- [65] Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 142.

- [66] Alternately stated in Lacanese, Burke's theories of rhetoric could be said to privilege the "subject of the signifier" at the expense of the "subject of *jouissance*." See Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 141–66.
- [67] Corder, "Argument," 24.
- [68] Corder, "Argument," 31.
- [69] Brockriede, "Arguers," 1–2.
- [70] See Thomas S. Frenz, "Towards a Rhetoric of the Interior," *Communication Monographs* 60 (1993): 83–89; and Joshua Gunn and Shaun Treat, "Zombie Trouble: A Propaedeutic on Ideological Subjectification and the Unconscious," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91 (2005): 144–74.
- [71] Ervin, "Love Composes Us," 322–23.
- [72] Les Claypool, "Seas of Cheese," on *Sailing the Seas of Cheese*, performed by Primus. Interscope, 1991. Compact disc.
- [73] Lacan, *Book XI*, 268.
- [74] Although Lacan does not typically capitalize "the Real," in this essay I will do so to distinguish Lacan's sense from the more mundane understanding of "the real" as opposed to illusion.
- [75] Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), 173.
- [76] Žižek, *Metastases*, 178.
- [77] Žižek, *Metastases*, 179.
- [78] Žižek, *Metastases*, 179.
- [79] Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 248.
- [80] One could also easily argue that the fear of kitsch has motivated a focus on canonized texts in rhetorical studies in the past. This focus has become fuzzy with the now established permissibility to study the popular. See, e.g., Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991); and Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 19–46.
- [81] Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 251.
- [82] Foss and Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion," 5.
- [83] Foss and Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion," 13 (emphasis added).
- [84] Wood, "Personal is Still Political."
- [85] Bonnie J. Dow, "Feminism, Difference(s), and Rhetorical Studies," *Communication Studies* 46 (1995): 110–11.
- [86] Cloud, "Not Invited," 1–3.
- [87] Quoted in Evans, *Introductory Dictionary*, 38. Also see Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 6.
- [88] Oliver, *Witnessing*, 4.
- [89] Lacan, *Ecrits*, 3–9.
- [90] Oliver, *Witnessing*, 138–42.
- [91] Oliver, *Witnessing*, 4.
- [92] Recent work in rhetorical studies on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas has begun to explore non-Hegelian forms of identification and pre-representational relations; see Diane Davis, "Addressing Alterity: Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Nonappropriative Relation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38 (2005): 191–212.
- [93] For a nuanced approach, see Davis, "Identification."
- [94] Ronell, *Stupidity*, 150.
- [95] Davis, "Identification," (in press) (emphasis in the original).
- [96] Oliver, *Witnessing*, 222.

- [97] See Irigaray, *The Way*.
- [98] Davis, "Identification," (in press). Also see Benjamin D. Powell, "Neural Performance: Reconsidering Agency as the Embodiment of Neural Nets," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 27 (2007): 107–23.
- [99] Davis, "Identification," (in press).
- [100] Ronell, *Stupidity*, 150.
- [101] I mean to indicate solidarity here with the ironies advanced by Richard Rorty and James P. McDaniel. See James P. McDaniel, "Liberal Irony: A Program for Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35 (2002): 297–327; and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).