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The Invisible Argument: Recognizing race through visceral reasoning

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ABSTRACT: This project works to define a visceral mode of reasoning in relation to Gilbert's (1997) system of argumentation and evaluates whether or not the body is always implicated in discourse. Kennedy's announcement of King's assassination will illustrate how a transgression of subjectivity was met by a momentary suspension of racialized terms of the day. The racialized body allows examination into the excess of the argument or that which lies beyond the words.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, body rhetoric, Martin Luther King, Jr., race, reasoning, Robert F. Kennedy

1. INTRODUCTION

"Dr. King is dead and a White man did it, why does he [Kennedy] have to come here!" Reverend Lewis Deer remembered "a Negro lady, grabbing his arm [...]" and crying out as she heard the news of King's assassination from a transistor radio before Kennedy arrived on site (Anatol and Bittner 1968, p. 31). Unlike his previous campaign stops, this space was not met with a large stage, podium, lights, or chairs. No amass of press, just a politician and people. Trulock (2008), a local union secretary and audience member waiting for Kennedy's arrival, narrates:

The podium, the platform from which he spoke was maybe twenty yards...I recall it kind of being two trailers stuck together. There certainly wasn't a permanent kind of stage thing. It may have been a semi truck or trailer rigged to be a stage but it was some kind of platform that was improvised to be a stage.¹

¹ First hand accounts from individuals who were at this speech or had significant involvement in creating this event were interviewed in effort to recover the primary accounts of this historical night. The interviews used in this project were collected by me XXXX for a research project entitled *Remembering April 4, 1968: Audience perspectives of Robert Kennedy's speech in Indianapolis*. Interviews were also collected and generously passed on by Donald Boggs and David Baird of Covenant Productions, Anderson University, for a project entitled *Interviews done for the documentary "A Ripple of Hope: Robert F. Kennedy in Indianapolis, 1968," conducted by Donald Boggs and David Baird*. Much appreciation is lent to the work of Boggs and Baird as this project would not have been the same without their contribution.

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To consider the physicality of the space in which Kennedy announced King's death to a predominately African American audience is to contribute to the importance of visceral reasoning in argumentation. This mode, as Gilbert (1997) put forth, "covers a wide range of territory including, but not limited to, physical circumstances, physical events, body language, and other forms of non-verbal communication" (p. 92). Not unlike the aphorism that "actions speak louder than words," this mode is concerned with the rhetorical effect as one that is based on the performance of the argument. There are different visceral or sensory reactions involved as well as a certain reality or material weight of the body. Thus, attention paid to body rhetoric foregrounds the immediate context, by way of the physical, and provides a shift in what we consider a legitimate argument.

Coupling the work on visceral argumentation (Gilbert 1997) with body rhetoric (DeLuca 1999) will provide explicit insight in how the physical body, particularly a body(ies) at risk (Natanson 1965), holds the force of the argumentative move. Furthermore, race will appear as a fundamental feature embodied in argument culture (Mills 1997). This will be done by defining a visceral mode of reasoning that implicates race as a defining feature. Such a definition can allow examination into the excess of the argument or that that extends beyond words. By acknowledging the physicality of reasoning allows for evaluation of whether or not the body is always implicated in discourse. In turn, how a momentary transgression of subjectivity can temporarily suspend racialized terms is exposed.

As the scene of Kennedy's announcement of King's assassination is set, it becomes evident that due attention must be paid to the racial implications embedded in culture and argument. By carefully exploring the politics of the participants involved, along with the physicality of the space, the subjectivity obtainable in the phenomenology of the lived body(ies) pushes critical thought to consider visceral argumentation and, in this specific case, the role of race in body rhetoric. The body holds one there in the action, moment, and/or experience and the *racialized* body carries its own subjective set of implications.

2. THE VULNERABLE BODY: CONSTITUTING RACE IN VISCERAL REASONING

The vulnerability of the body is an essential component used to measure the force of the physical argument. Vulnerability or risk can be seen operating in the visceral argument by how one situates, displays, or uses their body in the communicative interaction. The level of risk involved also contributes to the genuine effectiveness of the rhetorical move. In other words, the more vulnerable the body the possibility for authentic reception of the delivered message is heightened. As the individual (or group of individuals) opens oneself up *actually* in an argument; meaning, if one explicitly risks their selfhood in the very activity of the argument, then the body transcends that specific spoken argument to *being* the argument. Natanson (1965) summarizes,

I risk myself in an argument when I know or sense that the very nature of the activity I'm engaging in has its own rationale within which what I am and who I am must be determined (p. 14).

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Thus, Natanson (1965) defines genuine argument as “[...] nothing more than the commitment of the self to the full implications of a philosophical dialectic [...],” and a willingness to realize that there is true risk involved if making an authentic argument. “Risk, then, is not really the condition of serious or genuine arguments; risk is rather the dialectical possibility of argument with intent to persuade” (Natanson 1965, p. 15).² One place to locate this risk is in the body. DeLuca (1999) presents a call to critics reinforcing

[...] bodies as a rich source of argumentative force. Such a task requires a reconsideration of argumentation so as to take account of public arguments that exceed the boundaries of reason and words. (p. 20)

Not unlike this project, DeLuca (1999) fronts the importance of considering the body as a fundamental component of the argumentative move.³

Rhetorical tactics used in argument, then, are dependent on the body(ies) of the participants and the situational context of the immediate moment. The resolve to respond nonviolently in Indianapolis developed from emotional connections between Kennedy and his audience as much as it came from logistic reasoning (which also speaks to the interconnectivity of the visceral, logical, and emotional modes of argument).⁴ It is a goal to understand how a transgression of subjectivity was met by a momentary suspension of racialized terms of the day as Indianapolis remained calm while several other cities and towns revolted in rage. It is proposed that Kennedy, and his audience, while less focused on the logical argument, registered feelings (both visceral and emotional) in the moment which presented an opportunity for authentic connection and racial reconciliation.

In addressing the specific interests of the visceral, which include Kennedy’s whiteness in a racialized space, the reciprocal relationship of white moral and political consciousness, as well as, potential moments of convergence between blackness and whiteness, a critical cultural conceptual framework is useful. In particular, Mill’s (1997) notion of the *Racial Contract* will drive the understanding that race is an undercurrent in all aspects of social being—politically, morally, and epistemologically. Coupled with work on whiteness as a critical construct (Perkinson 2002, 2004), Kennedy’s public persona as a white male political candidate in 1968 can then be examined.⁵ Mills (1997) and Perkinson (2002, 2004) both help foster a better understanding of the importance of

² Some examples presented by DeLuca (1999) include how the EarthFirst!ers “become nature” by sitting in trees (even when they are cut down), blockading roads with their bodies (often their entire body is buried with only their head showing), and chaining themselves to logging equipment, as well as, dressing in animal costumes for public hearings (p. 12). Act Up/Queer Nation use their bodies as arguments by hosting ‘die-ins’ in Catholic Churches in protest of condemnation of homosexuality, they have ‘kiss-ins’ in shopping malls to challenge the default notion of heterosexuality, and they wear “the most fabulous gay regalia” to disrupt the normativity of the heterosexual positionality (p. 19). Such body rhetoric or visceral argument attempts to ameliorate the hierarchy based on domination to recognize difference.

³ Discussing examples of visceral social protest, DeLuca (1999), elaborates, “The body is front and center in their (ACT UP and Queer Nation) arguments for it is the body that is at stake—its meanings, its possibilities, its care, and its freedoms. In their protest actions, the activists use their bodies to rewrite the homosexual body as already constructed by dominant mainstream discourses—diseased, contagious, deviant, invisible” (p. 17).

⁴ Gilbert, 1997.

⁵ See Delgado & Stefanic 2001; Goodman 2001; A.E. Lewis 2004; Martin et al. 1996; Mills 1997; Nakayama & Krizek 2005; Perkinson 2002, 2004; Shome 2000.

the location of Kennedy's April 4, 1968 address as a racialized space.⁶ Such work on the body brings new ways of considering Kennedy's gesture of appearing in an Indianapolis urban neighbourhood (a racialized space) to announce the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. to a predominantly African American audience (or gathering of black bodies). Such an examination will bring light to potential moments of convergence between blackness and whiteness.

Critical rhetoric advances anti-essentialist and social constructionist studies of race while not abandoning the concept of race as a lived and material experience. Acknowledgment of such requires a critical turn to examine how the terms of racism are created, circulated, and dramatized through visceral reasoning; otherwise, we continue to support the invisibility of race as a contributing and fundamental feature of argument culture. The *Racial Contract* gives argumentation and rhetorical studies a theoretical framework for situating discussions of race and whiteness (Mills 1997). Such a critical viewpoint that explores the political, moral, and epistemological elements of race in terms of agreements (formal or informal) in civil society offers much to argumentation studies. Language, and its use in social construction, now under the lens of race, ignites endless opportunities for research. Concerns of invisibility/normativity, material wealth, interconnectedness of race/class/gender, identity construction, power/expressions of power, are only a few themes to take up when considering race as a fundamental component of visceral argument.⁷

Race is foundational. If, as Mills (1997) suggests,

[...] racism is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties

then a global theoretical framework is needed to situate discussions of race and white racism (p. 3). *The Racial Contract*, in contrast to traditional conceptions of the 'social contract,' offers a way to supplement the lack of discussion about racial justice.⁸ In difference to the social contract, Mills' (1997) legitimates race as a stand-alone category that carries with it its own logic. *The Racial Contract*, having a similar basis as the social contract—with terms of agreement between government and individuals in rule of society (based on equality)—diverge when highlighting that the social contract was founded with the concept of white supremacy which is based on the subjugation of nonwhites (Mills 1997, p. 3). This scholarship also illustrates how race trumps the class category in which it becomes a primary ordering principle in modernity. *The Racial Contract* helps further the understanding that race is the undercurrent in all aspects of social being—morally, politically, and epistemologically (Mills 1997). These features exist in difference to the social contract (which contains only moral and political elements).

⁶ See Haymes 1995.

⁷ See Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Flores and Moon 2002; Lewis 2004; Avant-Mier and Hasian Jr. 2002; Crenshaw 1997; Jackson II, 2000; Roediger 2002; Martin et. al. 1996

⁸ In keeping with traditional contract theoreticians—Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant—the Racial Contract proposes to outline the social structure, government functions, and the people's moral psychology that agrees to *The Racial Contract*. Mills outlines each of these theorists' contribution and/or their lack of acknowledgment of the role of race.

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In this particular historical context, *The Racial Contract* can be seen as influential in determining who gets certain kinds political representation, by whom and how (Mills 1997). Kennedy's performance, in response to King's assassination, calls into question ideas about political responsibility, rhetorical invention, dialogic understanding between speaker and audience, moral codes, as well as, epistemological understanding between a white body and a black community. Thus, Mills' (1997) theory is one appropriate way to investigate how peace prevailed in Indianapolis that night when in so many other cities it did not. Following the work of Mills (1997) and Haymes (1995), the space in which Kennedy delivered his speech should be considered a racialized space. As noted by Mills (1997),

Part of the purpose of the color bar/the color line/apartheid/jim crow is to maintain these spaces in their place, to have the checkerboard of virtue and vice, light and dark space, ours and theirs, clearly demarked so that the human geography prescribed by the *Racial Contract* can be preserved. (p. 48)

Acknowledging that Kennedy was advised by city officials, law enforcement officers, his campaign staff, and family members to cancel his trip to the Indianapolis neighbourhood upon finding out about the death of Dr. King indicates the role of the visceral in the multifaceted effects of Kennedy's appearance. Due to the rise of violent racial outbreaks across the United States—even in the absence of such a tragedy as King's assassination—Kennedy was urged to cancel his trip. However, Kennedy continued forward. Such a move by highlights his rejection of the racialized notions of African Americans as violent as well as illustrates a breaking of the *Racial Contract* in which Kennedy created a rhetorical interruption with his white body by entering a racialized space.⁹

Contextual elements such as the racialized space, power, and political hierarchy could all be considered components of the backing of the visceral mode. However, as aptly noted by Gilbert (1997),

The greatest force of the physical comes from the general backing that we believe what we see, and we know "what's going on." This information comes from the same sources as our information about emotions, and, indeed, much of it is inter-related. (p. 92)

Here we see issues of authenticity through body rhetoric raised as well as how modes of reasoning operate in conjunction with each other. For example, the feeling of fear can call upon all the logical, visceral, emotional, and kisceral modes of reasoning (Gilbert 1997). Body(ies) evoke a sense of emotional urgency that words alone do not. The presence of a body(ies) personalizes the argument and gives a face(s) to the proclamation. Kennedy, by placing his white political body in a racialized space to announce the assassination of Dr. King, injects an emotional urgency into the argument that can not be denied. Thus, a turn to consider the power of visceral reasoning is needed alongside Kennedy's words.

⁹ According to Mills (1997),

In entering these (dark) spaces, one is entering a region normatively discontinuous with white political space, where the rules are different in ways ranging from differential funding [...] to the absence of police protection (p. 51).

3. UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS OF *THE RACIAL CONTRACT*: APRIL 4, 1968

Acknowledging a visceral mode of reasoning exposes how a transgression of subjectivity can temporarily suspend racialized terms. Kennedy calls out:

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black. (Kennedy 1968)

The immediate situation of the Kennedy speech foregrounds, most prominently, issues of race. Race is fronted when considering that Kennedy's announcement occurred during the rise of black power and Kennedy, speaking mainly to an African American audience, informed them of the assassination of Dr. King. Realizing that race is foundational, multi-dimensional, and hegemonic, it is clear that argumentation studies requires a reflexive turn to foreground racial concepts to get at Kennedy's full message on April 4, 1968. The presence of race in Kennedy's words points us directly towards the physicality of the rhetorical situation.

In acknowledging the terms of Mills' (1997) contract, we should consider the event as a negotiation, or as a written back-and-forth, contested exchange. Kennedy states:

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization -- black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion and love. (Kennedy 1968)

Here, again, Kennedy acknowledges two opposing worldviews operating in the United States—one black and the other white. Such a divisive acknowledgement provides evidence that the terms of the *Racial Contract* were alive and functioning fully that April, 1968.

Inevitably urging for a recommitment to compassion and understanding, Kennedy also acknowledged the residual tensions that stand in the foundation of a unified democracy. Significantly, he brings forth race and speaks out on the emotional tensions possibly felt by those in his audience. This identifying element is important as it will serve as a piece of Kennedy's move toward undermining the terms of *The Racial Contract*. This is just one element of the multifaceted rhetorical effect.

4: MARKING THE WHITE BODY: A REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS OF VISCERAL ARGUMENT

Beyond the constant reminder of the racial divide in his words, Kennedy as a white body (or a white *Kennedy* body) highlights the importance of visceral reasoning in argumentation. Because he was a Kennedy, to suggest that he can dissociate himself from his whiteness, is unrealistic. Race is everything. Considering whiteness as a cultural

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construct, Kennedy's gesture could be considered a move to capitalize on his whiteness to gain votes for his political campaign. Such an idea is representative of Perkinson's (2004) notion of dominant complacency that emerges when one evokes racial difference to further one's own resources (p. 14). Perkinson (2004) writes:

Whiteness exists in this country today as a color-blind fiction of innocence, publicly posturing itself as the neutral pursuit of the Dream, wishing well on all sides, intending equality, sorry for poverty, certain of the uprightness of its own vision of ascent into the gated bliss of sole proprietorship (p. 14).

This claim brings concern to Kennedy's role in the April 4th event and reiterates that being a white political candidate contributes to the formulation of the rhetorical effect. If implicit complacency is inherent in whiteness then Kennedy's gesture of going into an urban community needs to be re-examined.¹⁰ Such a move questions the likelihood of a temporary suspension of the terms of the *Racial Contract*.

Consider Kennedy's plea toward equality and what it would really mean for an African American audience physically, emotionally, and socially aware of real life materialistic *un*-equality.¹¹ Marked bodies are the likely bias that invariably attaches to positions of power. Evan Thomas (2008), Kennedy biographer, reflects:

Bobby Kennedy was somewhat of a spoiled rich kid. The last person you would think who would be sensitive to the sufferings of the poor. But he was not just any spoiled rich kid. He was a spoiled rich kid who had been put down by his older siblings, who had been put down by his own father who called him a runt, who'd been kind of the one who was left behind and left out [...] it [...] made him sensitive to suffering [...] he had a way of sympathizing and empathizing with people who had been left behind and couldn't articulate it or were lost. Maybe he came from an utterly different world but he understood the idea of feeling diminished and rejected and not respected and just wanting and needing and just not being able to help himself.

Thomas (2008) acknowledges Kennedy's privileged background but also presents Kennedy's ability to surpass such classed differences. While some audience members saw Kennedy's rhetoric as a means of identification with the crowd, despite racial or class differences, it is important to consider the implications put forth by those differences. By examining whiteness, as a strategic rhetoric, or by labeling those who would consider themselves to be white, contributions to the reflexive examination of the Indianapolis event is made.¹² Kennedy is a white body at risk (Natanson, 1965), working as a visceral interruption of *The Racial Contract* remains a foundational claim.

¹⁰ Perkinson (2004) writes,

What we are complicit with is a (now globalizing) regime that continues to mobilize and impose the markers of darkness for the sake of an accumulation of resources and rights on the light side of the racial divide (p. 14).

¹¹ African Americans in 1968 were living in a dramatically different materialistic reality than the one presented by Kennedy in Indianapolis. Toward the end of the 1960s, for the first time, incomes rose for African American middle-class families, but for most African Americans, incomes still fell significantly behind those of white families. Though improvements may seemingly have been underway the equality of African American life was still lacking momentum. Thus, at a time when the aspirations of the African American community were high, the actual conditions of employment, education, and housing were worsening (Little 1994, p. 15).

¹² See Crenshaw 2005; Nakayama and Krizek 2005.

5. SUBJECTIVE TRANSGRESSION SUSPENDS THE TERMS OF *THE RACIAL CONTRACT*

Kennedy's gesture could have resonated in *his* choice to reject stereotypical assumptions, or go forward in spite of them, and for that moment recognize the humanity that he was confronted with. The white body does have a choice in whether or not to uphold the *Racial Contract* (Mills 1997). Remember, that with the visceral mode of reasoning the "[...] the evidence "speaks for itself," and it does so physically" (Gilbert 1997, p. 86). Thus, following the line of visceral reasoning, Kennedy performs acceptance of the Indianapolis African American community and demonstrates fearlessness by ignoring warnings not to continue forward. In turn, Kennedy symbolically performs a rhetorical enactment, as his white body worked as an interruption to the terms put forth in *The Racial Contract* (Crenshaw 1997). His body gave pause in the moment which created space for authentic connectivity between races.

William Crawford (2008), a prominent leader in the African American community who was also present at the event reiterates the visceral impact of Kennedy's appearance:

I really, sincerely believe that there would have been a different reaction. [H]ere was a white man standing there, telling us that Dr. King had been killed by a white man and he said "white man" in his presentation. He said, "For those of you—you that are black, we can understand because it looks like a white man killed him. But also, a white man killed my brother," and he shared it. And [...] that tempered us, so if he had not been here, I think that the reaction would have been much different. It would have been similar to other communities because when we found out we would have been just wanting to reach out and react, as opposed to reflect.

Thus, according to Crawford (2008), Kennedy's white body was just as impacting as his words. Laverne Steward (2008), resident of the community and audience members agrees and puts forth that:

It was like him being here made a great impact. It made a difference. Knowing that Martin had been killed by a white man, but yet here is a white man who cared for King as we did, who understood and whom we felt cared for us and how we were being treated, so yeah [it did make a difference].

The visceral force of his argument comes from the rejection of racialized norms and acknowledgment of the responsibilities derivative of a privileged position. The risk involved rejoins and is indicative of the visceral force of the rhetorical enactment.

Regardless of what Kennedy's motives were behind his speaking act, it becomes apparent that he rejected the stereotype that African Americans were violent and/or irrational beings. Kennedy recognized the power (or rationality) of the African American individual to make the appropriate choice to remain non-violent or to vote for the Kennedy campaign.¹³ Rather than play up or add to the psychological dysfunctioning of

¹³ Considering Kennedy's recognition of the power of the African American community, it is essential to illuminate the Kennedy campaign effort to schedule a political rally in a "marked" community. This ground-breaking move signals the reformulation of what was considered an appropriate space for political public address. Further, working together with members of the community to plan the political rally

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the African American community by reaffirming the prejudice of black = violent or black = insignificant votes, Kennedy made steps to break away from the *Racial Contract*. Kennedy opted to recognize the power of the African American people, rejecting negative stereotypes and went forth, in part seeking his own support, but also in seeking support for the country overall.

6. CONCLUSION

One main limitation of visceral reasoning is the imperfection of implicit meanings. Body arguments are open to multiple readings that have the potential to reject the force of the intended argument depending on who has the power to provide the verbal meanings to the body rhetoric. Such conclusions, particularly those regarding raced, gendered, or classed bodies, raises concern of how lived body(ies) operate in argumentation. Furthermore, as put forth by Gilbert (1997) the argument is comprised in such a way that it precludes “translation into the linguistic, logical mode,” (p. 85). And “[...]while we can certainly *linguistically describe* the argument [...] it is not the description that [convinces]” but the overall behaviour or performance of the participants (Gilbert, 1997, p. 85). Therefore, as the Kennedy/King event suggests, such performance is often constituted by the contextual residue of the argument interaction.

There are two base assumptions that are challenged by a constitutive view: 1) The focus on words, both in terms of argument and style, 2) the focus on persuasion rather than identification. Theories of classical Aristotelian persuasion are limited to a causal model (speaker sends a message which causes the audience to react in a certain way). This does not account for circumstances prior to or following the sending of the message. Whether or not bodies of color operate paradigmatically or if they lose the strength of their argument to outside forces that hold the power to determine the verbal translation of their body rhetoric is of concern. However, to dismiss the relevance of race when considering the body is to contribute to the color-blindness that saturates our culture, society, and academic endeavours.

Kennedy’s announcement of King’s assassination is one real life example in which the body(ies)—both Kennedy and his audience members—were present in the rhetorical effect. A better understanding the political and moral responsibility of white political representatives, as well as the importance of bodily gesture in breaking racialized codes is needed in argumentation studies. By placing his body in a racialized space, along with his delivery (tone, gestures, voice, and eye contact), Kennedy illustrated his sincerity through performance and displayed the emotional modes of seriousness, grief, and hesitation. Kennedy, through his embodiment, sensed the mood of the crowd and before an emotion-filled, impressionable Indianapolis audience, Kennedy altered his body rhetoric to fit a tragedy no one could have foreseen. Only by doing the reflective work necessary can one begin to understand the multifaceted argumentative moves inherent in real, lived communication interaction.

illustrates, at minimum, that the Kennedy campaign recognized the power of the African American neighborhood as potential voters. Innovative in its own right, the political appearance in the racialized space would prove to be far more memorable than the planned initiative.

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In sum, we need a pedagogical shift away from discourse (verbal/written) as the primary place to render judgments about the effects of argumentation. Instead, research should work to foreground often outlying or peripheral features of argument such as feelings, authenticity, occasion, and body. Such a move challenges the emphasis on rationality, results, or model situations of the human condition as it emerges reflectively and intuitively. In order to uncover potential sites of connection one must dig deep into the multiplicity of history, experience, culture, belief, and value that saturates any one given aspect of the argument. Through discovery beyond words we make visible the racial implications of visceral reasoning and, in turn, make the body a site for the otherwise silenced argument.

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[Link to commentary](#)

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¹⁴ Working title.

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