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## Affecting white accountability: what Mr. Rogers can tell us about the (racial) futures of communication

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Walking out of the documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, with a friend one Sunday morning, we reflected on a shared national childhood of being raised, in part, by Fred McFeely Rogers. Mr. Rogers, as the documentary pointed out, was dismissed by many as a simpleton, whose puppets communicated saccharine and naïve understandings of the world and its politics. However, the documentary went on to deconstruct this belief, in part by showcasing Mr. Rogers' warmth, thoughtfulness, and sophistication in crafting radical antifascist, antiwar, and antiracist messages. In his 50 years on the air, Mr. Rogers addressed issues from segregation to 9/11 and Vietnam to divorces. When read as part of the larger culture of PBS, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* illustrated the revolutionary potential of the station, with its low-budget programming and radical ideas. When the film ended and the house lights came up, a theater full of teary-eyed people walked out together, reminiscing about Mr. Rogers. We need not romanticize that moment of connection to theorize its significance. Mr. Rogers, though far from perfect, was a unifying figure who persuaded and performed gently, through trenchant analyses of structural oppression. In a moment when Generation X and Millennials are reaching adulthood only to find that the promises of the American Dream are largely unavailable to them, nostalgic returns to familiar figures and television shows have provided emotional balm for those in dire straits. In this moment, Mr. Rogers' tone offers a profound affective contrast to the divisive politics of Donald Trump, as well as a vehicle through which Generation X and Millennials imagine a compassionate and progressive world.

Using *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* as a starting point, this essay contemplates the pedagogical, scholarly, and racial futures of the field of communication, particularly rhetorical studies, in a tumultuous world. Rhetoric, in a world that has been post-fact for longer than we care to admit, must reimagine its historical purpose as a discipline that devotes much of its energy to studying argument construction via *logos*. As the affective turns in sociology, psychology, cultural studies, gender studies, and ethnic studies, among others demonstrate, arguments are rarely made primarily *a posteriori* in the service of persuasion but rather *post facto* in the service of deeply held feelings and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> These feelings and beliefs are frequently tied up with our conceptions of intimacy, belonging, and citizenship in ways that can make us unreceptive to even the most well-established facts about the world.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, rhetoric scholars continue to insist on embracing rationality and

theory building as primary modes of engagement, thought, and analysis. Rhetoric is in need of a seismic shift in how it imagines persuasion. That shift requires thinking about the discipline's purpose as not about the excavation of ancient concepts, perfecting argument form, or producing complex theory but seeking accessible languages to talk about texts, divesting from *logos* as a site of radical change, and developing vocabularies for theorizing emotion in persuasion. The future of rhetoric rests in these practices.

This essay uses Mr. Rogers as an example of a figure who mobilized public feelings to persuade and unify. It argues that, despite his flaws, Mr. Rogers used grace and racial humility to perform accountable whiteness. In doing so, he provided a useful framework for thinking about the need for rhetoric to centrally engage affective economies, social structures, and their implications for persuasion, relationality, and community, particularly in imagining models of racial accountability. My analysis of Mr. Rogers draws on contemporary work on public feelings, modes of intimacy, and white fragility to theorize rhetoric's futures—and practices of white allyship—in two ways. First, I argue that Mr. Rogers' understanding of grace accessed modes of intimacy other than those offered by neoliberalism, which in turn facilitated persuasion. Second, I contemplate how mobilizing public feelings can produce forms of white accountability that are not possible to understand exclusively through analyses of *logos*.

### Public feelings and persuasion

As a privileged, white, Republican, Presbyterian minister, Mr. Rogers' embodied form and life experience did not resonate with the lived experiences of many. Nonetheless, his history of solitude, radical pedagogy of childhood, and consistent presence on television allowed him to connect with children and adults across race, class, gender lines, with deep empathy. Though it is easy to read him as a feel good figure, Mr. Rogers is actually not an easy emblem of progressive politics, particularly with respect to race and queerness. Nonetheless, he offers important examples of imperfect allyship as affective worldmaking. The manner in which Mr. Rogers negotiated his moral and ethical quandaries, notably through grace and racial humility, demonstrates how his role in public television was not simply one of advancing argument but cultivating feeling between individuals, particularly children, their peers, and their caregivers. The result was the transformation of individuals as well as social structures, in a process of collaborative televisual worldmaking. José Esteban Muñoz writes that the vantage points that worldmaking produces are “more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people.”<sup>3</sup> Read through the lens of queer worldmaking theory, Mr. Rogers is the curator of not only the Land of Make Believe but also the real world, through the movement of generous and persuasive public feelings.

The affective turn in academia has not yet filtered down into rhetoric to the same degree as other disciplines, in part because of rhetoric's investment in Western mind/body dualisms, with affect traditionally being linked with the feminine, the racially marginalized, and the irrational. When I speak of the affective turn, I am referring to literature that is concerned with how precognitive intensities, emotions, and public feelings arise and move. Figures such as Sara Ahmed, Elizabeth Anker, Ann Cvetkovich, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who build on long histories of US and global people of color and queer

scholarship, have laid groundwork for rhetoricians to consider how each of these shape and enable public discourses, particularly seeming rational ones.<sup>4</sup> Rhetoricians, including Jamie Landau, Caitlin Bruce, Lisa Corrigan, Jeremy Engels, and Paul Johnson, have begun to take up these same questions.

For a discipline that, until the 1980s, concerned itself almost entirely with *logos*, usually in epideictic form delivered by white men, the affective turn must be even stronger. In a 2015 book review, Erin Rand highlights how “patrolling the boundaries of affect can have authorizing functions in public discourse.”<sup>5</sup> Reclaiming “bad feelings,” she argues, is an important part of ensuring that some actors, including queers of color, have space for full democratic participation.<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, understanding how public feelings inform all arguments is an important prerequisite to studying persuasion. Emotional registers extend beyond “context” and even “critical rhetoric.”<sup>7</sup> Studying public feelings is partially about understanding how the movement of emotion between bodies preconfigures the rhetorical situation and produces unseen constraints. Moreover, it highlights the need to understand how emotional subject positions inform policy outcomes in the world. Public feelings create the conditions of possibility in which arguments, policies, and democracy are forged. One of rhetoric’s futures rests with scholars who are willing to confront the production, investment in, and circulation of public feelings. While facts may persuade those who are emotionally receptive or inclined to agree with the rhetor, they rarely persuade those who are not moved to do so. Mr. Rogers’ performances of grace and racial humility demonstrate how feeling is and remains fundamental to encouraging others to embrace radical politics of care, generosity, and grace.

### ***Grace and the neoliberal transaction economy***

Grace, a term often used in the context of religion, connotes unconditional goodwill and abundant forgiveness. As a concept of godly benevolence, it evokes superhumanness and otherworldliness. Mr. Rogers’ ministerial investments undoubtedly reflected these definitions. Yet grace can also be understood secularly, in the context of social justice, as a practice of generous care and racial humility. Read in this sense, Mr. Rogers’ connections with children of all identities were not naïve; they were mobilizations of what Bonilla-Silva calls “racialized emotions,”<sup>8</sup> specifically the generative potential of architectures of self produced through white privilege. Mr. Rogers interfaced with the public not with judgment but with characteristic openness. While grace is not always preferable to other feelings, as embodied affect, it is best understood as a “white feeling” that those with structural racial privilege and invested in a just world ought to be ethically obligated to perform.<sup>9</sup>

Morgan Neville, Director of *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?*, described Fred Rogers as embodying “radical kindness.”<sup>10</sup> A core part of his philosophy of kindness was grace, “the idea of bestowing good to people, even if they don’t deserve it, and with no expectation of anything back. It’s a selfless idea of putting good into the world and treating people with understanding and kindness.”<sup>11</sup> This reading of grace as not about deservingness is grounded in ethics of benevolence and gentleness and oppositional to the transactional model of gratitude that Engels contends dominates in today’s neoliberal world.<sup>12</sup> Gratitude, also a public feeling, frequently produces a sense of reciprocal obligation that lends itself to destructive neoliberal politics. More specifically, gratitude is a vehicle for producing debt instead of unconditional warmth. Rogers’ grace functions as an emotional

vehicle for confronting the notion that individuals “owe” one another for providing care or that some are simply not worthy of kindness.<sup>13</sup>

Mr. Rogers’ way of being highlights the unique responsibility that white allies have in showing grace to those who face daily racial trauma. As a cisnet, able-bodied, white man of the cloth, the public television host had considerable personal and cultural space to act with relentless kindness. He was and remains a model for important characteristics of allyship who demonstrates why whites have different affective space in which to move than people of color. Via acts of grace, Mr. Rogers reallocates his power and privilege, in ways that create opportunities for crafting affective persuasion and expressing emotional vulnerability. Grace is a public feeling that Mr. Rogers used to build the very community of children-turned-adults that shared in moments of connection, celebration, and grief in screenings of *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?*

Perhaps surprisingly, Mr. Rogers’ grace did not exclude or judge “bad feelings.” It included seriously accepting and hearing anger, even rage, in thoughtful and generative ways reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s prescriptions for “uses of anger.”<sup>14</sup> It did not preclude criticism, it did not preclude upset, and it did not preclude protest. Rather, it describes a centered calm, based in common humanity and measured emotionality. The contours and productiveness of his grace are evident in the Senate hearing in which he seemingly unilaterally secured funding for PBS. Testifying to the need for public television in 1969, Mr. Rogers faced an impatient, oppositional, and seemingly immovable Senator John Pastore. Mr. Rogers testified that he cared deeply about the “inner drama” of childhood, that he was committed to helping children learn emotional self-regulation, a question fundamentally about *feeling*:

... if we in public television can only make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health ... it’s much more dramatic that two men could be working out their feelings of anger – much more dramatic than ... gunfire. I’m constantly concerned about what our children are seeing, and for 15 years I have tried ... to present what I feel is a meaningful expression of care.<sup>15</sup>

Here, Mr. Rogers performed grace, not only toward children but also toward Senator Pastore. Mr. Rogers’ unabashed gentleness and appeal through feeling itself changed the character of the interaction and the tone of the moment, in a way that produced space for political persuasion. Grace manifests here as the “meaningful expression of care,” a positionality of generosity and openness, that allowed even Senator Pastore to embrace a policy that was seemingly unpopular with his constituents. Through grace, Fred Rogers cultivated the “affective receptivity” that Ioanide contends is a prerequisite to persuasion on issues of race.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Racial humility and accountable whiteness***

Along with Fred Rogers’ commitment to grace came humility. Mr. Rogers practiced white allyship in a manner that showcased the importance of humbleness toward self and others in racial struggle. He wrote in *The World According to Mister Rogers*,

The *really* important “great” things are never center stage of life’s dramas; they’re always “in the wings.” That’s why it’s so essential for us to be mindful of the humble and the deep rather than the flash and the superficial.<sup>17</sup>

For Mr. Rogers, humility operated as a public feeling that moderated arrogance and created space for the engagement with the inner worlds of others. In being humble, he made room to listen and respect those who were different and often dismissed, especially children, in their moments of struggle, triumph, and trauma.

Mr. Rogers' performance of humility is particularly apparent in the contexts of race and gender. He performed humbleness as a mechanism for acknowledging his white privilege and performative mistakes, without blame or shame. In this way, Mr. Rogers' humility counteracted affective "white fragility," by role modeling openness and nullifying defensiveness.<sup>18</sup> The story of Officer Francois Clemmons is illustrative here. In the documentary, Clemmons describes how he occupied an ambivalently integrationist and queer space on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. He recounts in interview how in one episode of the show, which was filmed after Clemmons came out as gay, Fred Rogers invited him to take off his shoes and socks and put his feet in a swimming pool in the backyard with his friend. The deeply intimate scene between the two men proceeded with Mr. Rogers washing Officer Clemmons' feet. In that historical moment, when the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, Mr. Rogers' gentle act of radical intimacy signaled a refusal to accept the segregationist and homophobic impulses of the time. While Mr. Rogers articulated the political difficulties with Officer Clemmons being out on the show, he nonetheless expressed his unconditional love and care for his friend on television and in person.

Though not brash in its sentiment of acceptance, the gesture opens affective space for embracing difference and signals a commitment to community. Officer Clemmons and Mr. Rogers share a reciprocal bond of care and a sense of responsibility to one another, even as they hold different politics. While we may never know the reality of Mr. Rogers' position on race or queerness, it is clear from Clemmons' words that the unconditionality of Fred Rogers' love and acceptance was a powerful force in his healing. Washing feet is metaphorically significant, not just for Christians but for Hindus and Muslims as well. Whether a sign of love and servanthood, respect, or absolution, foot washing is a powerful symbolic act that communicates a sense of connection, respect, and supplication. Mr. Rogers' performance of foot washing operates as a powerful vehicle for critiquing continuing antiblackness and toxic masculinity in the nation and linking individuals to one another despite their differences. While Mr. Rogers' political conservatism is a vexing question for progressives, his much maligned masculinity certainly helped him develop the empathy to model humility. Mr. Rogers helped to build an emotional groundwork for the more direct and radical engagement with difference that was occurring in other spaces and over time. Generationally speaking, Mr. Rogers' affect, particularly around racial humility, started to build a schema for shared white responsibility in healing race and gender wounds.

## Feeling rhetoric

Mr. Rogers observed, "It's easy to say 'it's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes."<sup>19</sup> As sites for the study of human messaging, rhetoric—and communication—are obligated to contemplate their roles in not just analyzing but also *constructing* a world in which others can thrive. Theorizing rhetoric without an attentive eye toward praxis or social responsibility deprives the field of its radical potential. As part of

understanding persuasion alongside praxis and social responsibility, it is imperative that scholars of rhetoric explore how structures of feeling make particular types of worldmaking more and less possible.<sup>20</sup> Embracing structures of feeling as fundamental to persuasion will allow rhetoric to move forward as a discipline, in ways that are practical as well as theoretical. In my own work, the interrogation of affect takes the form of theorizing the underlying emotional positionalities from which individuals engage the world, articulate their identities, and filter “rational” arguments.

Grace is increasingly lost in battles between the Conservative Right and the Progressive Left in the United States, often for good reason but also with devastating effects on democratic functioning. Thinking about the utility of grace performed from the privileged position of white allies in disarming rhetorical violence is important, particularly in a political moment in which the opposite prevails. Fred Rogers, a public figure who transformed the nation’s affective culture for generations, demonstrated how changing feelings can make space for persuasion, because the former and the latter are fundamentally intertwined. Instead of returning to classical rhetoric to understand how public feelings move, rhetoricians would be well served to turn to other disciplines and racial and religious traditions in understanding affect, feeling, and emotion. In doing so, they will be able to deepen rhetorical understandings of meaning making. Even in letting go of sentimental attachment to him, it is possible to see how Fred Rogers attempted to move public feelings as a mechanism for encouraging care and communality. I use him as an example to show that more work is needed to understand how public feelings circulate and—as others in this special issue argue—become linked and delinked from progress and trauma. Such a task is urgent within the field, the academy, and in an increasingly precarious world.

## Notes

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2. Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 79 (2004): 117–39.
3. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 195.
4. Given the length of this piece, I follow Ahmed and Cveckovich in using affect, emotion, and public feelings interchangeably.
5. Erin J. Rand, “Bad Feelings in Public: Rhetoric, Affect, and Emotion,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2015): 174.
6. *Ibid.*
7. James Jasinski, “Instrumentalism, Contextualism, and Interpretation in Rhetorical Criticism,” in *Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of the Science*, eds. Alan G. Gross and William M. Keith (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997); Raymie E. Mckerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 91–111.
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11. Ibid.
12. Eric Miller, “Art of Gratitude—A Conversation with Jeremy David Engels,” *Eric C. Miller* (blog), May 30, 2018, <https://ericcmiller.com/2018/05/30/art-of-gratitude-a-conversation-with-jeremy-david-engels/>.
13. I say this with the caveat that people of color are always already subjects in extractive care economies. Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press: 2018), 136–48.
14. Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1997): 278–85; Mariana Alessandri, “It’s a Terrible Day in the Neighborhood, and That’s O.K.,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/28/opinion/mister-rogers-neighborhood.html>.
15. C-SPAN, “On May 1, 1969 Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers) Appeared Before Senate Commerce Committee to Support Public TV,” April 6, 1990, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4663883/1-1969-fred-rogers-appeared-senate-commerce-committee-support-public-tv>.
16. Paula Ioanide, *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 15.
17. Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember* (New York: Hachette Books, 2019).
18. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, rev. ed. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018).
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