

A Response to Natalie Midiri

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In her paper entitled “The Stylistic Effects of Human Rights Rhetoric: An Analysis of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2011 LGBT Human Rights Speech” (*YSW* v.10), Natalie Midiri argues that Clinton’s stylistic choices alienate the LGBT community. She specifically notes that Clinton’s use of the pronouns “they” and “we” function to separate the LGBT community from Clinton herself and the non-gay audience. Midiri’s analysis can be enriched by an examination of an earlier human rights speech by Clinton, delivered in 1995. I argue that Clinton did not alienate women in her 1995 speech as Midiri fears she does the LGBT community in her 2011 address; instead, she uses pronouns to refer to women inclusively. In response to Midiri, I add that Clinton’s earlier speech on women’s rights has the opposite effect of her 2011 speech, despite using similar stylistic strategies. Drawing on bell hooks’ theory of identity politics, I argue that identity politics has a troubling impact on the reception of Clinton’s 2011 speech and her pronoun usage. Ultimately, we must look at what Clinton says in 1995 in order to effectively analyze the rhetoric of her 2011 speech.

In order to contextualize Clinton’s 2011 LGBT rights speech, I employ Jessica Enoch’s methodology of rhetoric of survival. Enoch calls on scholars to “pursue the possibility that women’s words might gain new and meaningful effects outside their original rhetorical situation” and to “contextualize women’s rhetorical endeavors but then to

pursue other rhetorical situations to see how women’s stories are repeated and reinterpreted to gain different rhetorical effects” (198). I examine Clinton’s 1995 and 2011 speeches to determine how an analysis of her 1995 speech influences the interpretation of her 2011 speech. I use Enoch’s methodology to emphasize that stylistic choices can be evaluated outside of the immediate rhetorical situation in a way that produces different rhetorical effects. To analyze why Clinton’s 2011 human rights initiative fell short, it is necessary to understand not only the immediate context of the speech but also the context of Clinton’s famous 1995 speech.

Midiri argues that Clinton’s use of pronouns in her LGBT speech “separates the gay ‘they’ from the non-gay ‘we’” (101). She explains that, by referring to the audience and herself as “we,” Clinton “draws a distinct separation between the LGBT community and the audience to whom the speech is addressed” (101). Rather than referring to the entire human community as one body, Clinton differentiates the majority non-gay community from the minority LGBT community. In her speech, Clinton is arguing for the protection of human rights for LGBT individuals, but Midiri finds that her pronoun usage is problematic because it designates the LGBT community as something fundamentally different than Clinton’s non-gay community.

Why does Clinton’s pronoun usage in her 1995 speech come across differently than her 2011 address? In her 2011 speech, Clinton

uses “we” to refer to herself and the audience as one group, and the pronoun excludes the LGBT community. In contrast, in Clinton’s 1995 speech, “we” refers not only to herself and the audience but also to the women she is speaking about. In her speech, Clinton states, “But we must recognize that women will never gain full dignity until their human rights are respected and protected” (3). In this case, “we” refers to herself, the audience, and the women she speaks about. Clinton’s pronoun usage has a different effect in her women’s rights speech, largely because Clinton belongs to the group she is speaking about. This contrasts with her 2011 speech, in which Clinton’s “we” creates an oppositional relationship between Clinton and the LGBT community.

Clinton’s membership—or lack thereof—in the group she is referring to influences the way the group is perceived in relation to the audience. In her 1995 speech, Clinton stated, “We are the primary caretakers for most of the world’s children and elderly. Yet, much of the work we do is not valued” (2). Clinton uses “we” to directly identify herself as a member of the group that she is referring to, and the pronoun signals solidarity between the speaker (Clinton) and the spoken about (women). In contrast, in 2011, Clinton noted, “The lives of gay people are shaped not only by laws, but by the treatment they receive every day from their families, from their neighbors” (3). Midiri argues that Clinton’s lack of membership in the LGBT community translates into rhetoric that ultimately alienates the LGBT community from the audience and casts this group as Other.

The concept of Other has long been debated in feminist rhetoric, as women have most frequently been designated the Other in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir explains the concept of

the Other in the introduction to *The Second Sex*: “It is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One” (257). Clinton establishes herself as the One in her 1995 speech. Because she is a woman, Clinton considers women as the One by default. In contrast, Clinton describes the gay community as the Other in 2011 because she defines herself and the non-gay population as the One. This One/Other dichotomy complicates how the audience reacts to Clinton’s human rights claims.

Drawing on bell hooks’ concept of identity politics, I suggest that these we/they, One/Other issues could be avoided if we challenged identity politics and expanded our view of who we are. hooks claims, “To challenge identity politics we must offer strategies of politicization that enlarge our conception of who we are, that intensify our sense of intersubjectivity, our relationship to a collective reality” (59). It is not enough to politicize the self—people must broaden their view of who they are in such a way that they can identify with a larger, collective reality. Identity politics influences the way that both of Clinton’s speeches are received. In her 1995 speech, Clinton identifies with the women’s struggle because she is a woman. To the world, Clinton’s call for women’s rights rings true—after all, she is one of them. However, identity politics make Clinton’s 2011 speech challenging. Clinton is not a member of the LGBT community. To the world, it is problematic that Clinton is speaking out for LGBT rights because that struggle is not part of her identity. What basis does Clinton have to speak out, if this struggle for human rights is not hers? The pervasive notion of identity politics troubles the reception of Clinton’s speeches.

Though Clinton makes similar stylistic choices in her 1995 and 2011 speeches, her 2011 LGBT rights speech has an alienating effect towards the gay community while her 1995 women's rights speech bridges the gap between the audience and women. As Midiri claims, Clinton's 2011 speech alienates the LGBT community through pronoun usage, undermining the effectiveness of the speech. To Midiri's argument, I add that by reading Clinton's 2011 speech in the context of her 1995 speech, we can better understand the troubling impact identity politics has on the reception of her human rights speeches. Clinton's 2011 LGBT speech

falls short because it rests upon the claims of identity politics and the idea that a person can only be an ally if they personally identify or share experiences with that group. If Clinton's speech focused more on the collective reality of the human struggle and less on the distinction between the LGBT and non-LGBT population, her pronoun usage would be less isolating and more inclusive to the gay community. Ultimately, if we were to remove identity politics rather than rely on them, allies like Hillary Clinton would be able to speak as a part of a "we" group not on the basis of identification, but on the basis of a collective reality.

Works Cited

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