

Unclenching the Fist: Embodying Rhetoric and Giving Objects Their Due

In February 2004 I came about as close as I probably ever will to my fifteen minutes of fame. A reporter from the Associated Press (AP) called me asking questions about Monument to Joe Louis, which had just been vandalized. Vandalism would not otherwise be of interest nationally except that, on the surface of it, this particular act of vandalism expressed racial divisiveness expected in news from Detroit. Two white men from Redford, a close-in suburb of Detroit, had poured white paint over the monument in response to the shooting deaths of two white Detroit police officers. As the two men explained to police at the time of their arrest, “We did it to support you guys” (Schmitt). To write her story the AP reporter wanted from me some background on the monument. Specifically she wanted to know if Monument to Joe Louis, a 40 foot bronze fist and forearm, suspended from cables and thrust horizontally across the median of Jefferson Avenue in downtown Detroit, represented Black Power.

My heart sank as I realized my answer—“Not exactly”—did not give her the quote she wanted for her story. And so the next day as I read the AP story I thought yet again about the interconnectedness of actions, objects, and words. The vandals affirmed Monument to Joe Louis as a point of focus for anxieties about racial tensions in the urban environment of the greater Detroit area. But to say the monument was targeted because it symbolizes Black Power would have been both reductive and unproductive. The Fist, as it is known locally, became a target less because it is a monument representing some notion of Black Power and more because it is a gesture that defines—at the same time it defies—the city’s racial segregation. Detroit is a clear example of the spatial isolation of

blacks in urban centers from whites in suburban peripheries, an isolation used by those on the periphery to wield authority over the city center and those who occupy it. The Fist serves as a reminder to those both inside and outside Detroit that inner city residents, victimized by the rhetorical agency of privileged distance, do have at their disposal an embodied rhetorical agency, an ability to resist claims on the city that originate elsewhere. As a specific Black Power fist, Monument to Joe Louis embodies a rhetorical authority over the urban space of Detroit which resides with the people made to occupy that space.¹ A better understanding of the act of vandalism and the Monument to Joe Louis would have demanded more careful consideration of these dynamics of rhetoric's urban embodiments than the reporter's question allowed.

But the AP reporter was not looking for such an understanding of the vandalism. Writing that the incident was motivated by a racial divisiveness built into the landscape of Detroit probably would have made for good copy. Such a story would explain away the actions of the two men by not explaining anything at all, and it could have had a headline reading: "They did it because they live here." Wholly unsatisfactory, this explanation also seems unnecessary. At a gut level the actions of the two men who vandalized The Fist requires no explanation. Like everyone else, the AP reporter saw the vandals' actions as racist. It was hard not to. Brett Cashman and John Price not only covered The Fist in white paint, they also placed at the base of the monument two photocopied images of slain Detroit police officers Mathew Bowens and Jennifer Fettig. Across the images they wrote, "Courtesy of the Fighting Whities." We can easily sense the blatantly inflammatory nature of their act. It incenses us, repels us, disgusts and discourages us. Maybe it was these visceral responses the reporter wanted to give order

to, to make sense of these sensations. To write her story the reporter needed the vandalism to be more than sensed, more than felt, she needed it to make sense, to be explainable and then explained. If the explanation did not lie in the geography of racial divisiveness, then it could lie in the aberrant and abhorrent behavior of two individuals, in which case the headline could read: “They did it because of who they are.” But appeal to identity does not help us make sense of their actions either. At their hearing two weeks after the incident, Cashman and Price explained their motives themselves without otherwise making their actions any more sensible. As Price explained, “The Fighting Whities comment was simply a goof on political correctness,” a reference to a University of Northern Colorado intramural basketball team made up of mostly Native American students. And as Cashman put it, “We targeted the fist because of its violent imagery and the inappropriateness of a clenched fist as a prominent city symbol In a sense, we wanted to unclench the fist” (Schmitt).

Unclench the fist. Cashman’s words do not make sense. They do not satisfy as an explanation of the vandalism, but his words do speak volumes about urban embodiments of rhetoric. Viewed from outside the city, The Fist is a warning, gesturing menacingly, figuring forth a threat of senseless violence on all who cross into its vicinity. As Robert Scott observed in 1969 in his discussion of the Black Power fist, this kind of perception of The Fist is a partial and distorted perception (131), a perception that thwarts the gesture’s transformative potential by distracting us from its claim for refiguring and redistributing agency. To perceive The Fist as threat requires projection onto it of fear, a projection Monument to Joe Louis has endured long enough to have absorbed it into itself (“Art Symbolism”). Made into metal the gesture is unwavering. Its duration transforms it

from gesture into landmark, a “prominent city symbol” as Cashman called it, a persistent and definitive feature of the landscape of Detroit. The Fist. Cashman surely knew he and Price could not unclench The Fist. They could not make the fingers—cast in bronze—be other than they are.² At the same time, they also could not ignore the gesture and what they saw as its intention to bring harm. They simply had to “unclench The Fist.”

A fist unclenched—an open hand extended to others—would gesture forth the question Rodney King so earnestly asked in the midst of the looting and violence in Los Angeles in 1992, “Can’t we all just get along?” But I do not think Rodney King’s open hand of despair is what Cashman and Price had in mind when they thought to unclench The Fist. In Detroit, only a few months after Rodney King extended his hand in an appeal to end the violence in Los Angeles, three white Detroit police officers unclenched the fist of Malice Greene, a black motorist, by beating him to death. In his clenched fist Greene had held a vial of crack. The officers testified at their trial that Greene refused to unclench his fist even after he had been subdued. So they continued to choke and beat him.³ The officers could not otherwise regard Greene’s clenched fist as anything but a provocation, they simply had to unclench his fist.

Unclench the fist? Extend the open hand of rhetoric? How? How do people populate and communicate across the divide of racial segregation in urban areas? How do they gesture less menacingly toward each other in a landscape that so seems to encourage their gestures toward each other to be otherwise than they are? Divisiveness can seem so entrenched, so much a part of the landscape, so intractable, that a fist, the gesture of threat and fear, the seeming exhaustion of rhetoric, becomes unclenchable. The hand frozen in the gesture of a fist is no full embodiment of rhetoric, it is a parody of our civic

interactions. We must be able to unclench our fists if the full range and fluidity of embodied rhetorical possibilities are to be returned to urban residents, black as well as white. But how?

In what follows I take the occasion of The Fist having been vandalized to discuss the resources and ambitions in rhetorical studies available for making sense of our sensations of rhetoric as embodied. Cashman said he and Price wanted to unclench The Fist, to limit and narrow the gesture's significance, to make the threat less monumental. Taking the course of intolerance, their own counter-gesture aimed to coerce submission to the geographic distribution and racial organization of rhetorical agency. Despite their efforts—or perhaps because of them—Cashman and Price sent ripples running through the interwoven spaces, objects, and agents of embodied rhetorical activity. Gestures of embodied rhetorical activity, like the closed fist, are expressive because they are so attuned with and do so resonate with the world of our experience. They are our experience. A fist makes us uncomfortable because it makes us immediately aware that we are in the presence of coercion's embodiment.⁴ We are aware of it in our bodies. We sense it and want to make sense of it. Yet the options predominant in rhetorical theories fail us in our search for answers because they locate the sense of things in the unproductive options of either inevitability or idiosyncrasy. Taking the AP reporter's question about The Fist as a question asking to make sense of both the monument and its vandalism leads me in what follows to propose options for rhetorical theory other than inevitability (“They did it because they live here”) and idiosyncrasy (“They did it because of who they are”). I take the AP reporter's question seriously not simply because she asked it in earnest but because the question calls on rhetorical theory to make sense of

what we mean and why we can't all just get along. To answer such questions rhetorical theory must acknowledge widely available experiences like those of Cashman and Price and the reporter from the Associated Press. In what follows I take seriously the widely available experiences of rhetoric and follow their resonance into the problem of embodiment in rhetorical studies. I also take seriously the possibility of using the discourse of rhetorical studies to make sense of those experiences and sensations and answer the reporter's question. Taking my lead from *The Fist*, which gestures against a rhetoric privileging control from afar over bodies, objects, and spaces, I proceed through the AP reporter's question to find an answer for it in rhetorical thinking, an answer that highlights the availability and vulnerability of spaces, bodies, and objects to each other, an answer that allows us to imagine unclenching our fists.

Giving the object its due

The AP reporter who wanted me to tell her Monument to Joe Louis represents Black Power did not think meaning could simply be read off the object itself. If she did think that, she would not have needed me to tell her what *The Fist* represents. Just looking at it would have been enough. But just looking is not enough. She needed to verify a meaning that resides not in the object itself but outside it somewhere in the ethereal realms of interpretation, representation, and signification. Unfortunately if meaning cannot be read straight off the monument, then interpretation is even harder to discern. Questions about a meaning originating either in people's intentions or in signifying structures satisfy less and provide far fewer answers because they spiral endlessly away from the object of interest itself. Like a majority of people, the reporter

responded to the gap opened between intention and object and structure by pulling even harder on interpretation to close it.

The futility of such efforts was captured at The Fist's unveiling in 1986 when the monument's creator, Robert Graham, responded to the question about his monument symbolizing Black Power by saying, "People bring their own experiences to the sculpture. I wanted to leave the image open, allowing it to become a symbol rather than making it specific" (Colby). Like the reporter, Graham locates the meaning of The Fist less in the materialization of his intention and more in the cognitive responses of those who experience it. According to this widely held version of signification, the monument as symbol does not betray any intention. Graham had to be asked whether his sculpture symbolizes Black Power. Revealed to the public the monument stands on its own, just there, as if unintended. Just there. A piece of the landscape. The Fist. Intentions and understandings are brought to it, it is an object made to mirror meanings. As a surface reflecting responses, the perceivable object comes to matter less than the interpretations it occasions. As a mirror of interpretation it is seen as reflecting quite a lot, everything from material conditions to ideology to racial characteristics to personal character. Over time elaborations of interpretations begin to resonate, deferral and difference appear to be the whole of signification, generating other, sometimes unimagined responses, such as that of Cashman and Price. At least I do not think Graham imagined his notion of people bringing their own experiences to the sculpture to include two men intending to unclench The Fist by covering it in white paint.⁵

Whatever Graham did or did not imagine, a lot follows from this way of thinking about where we locate embodied rhetorical activity. If The Fist is a kind of symbol

because it reflects back people's experiences of it, then Cashman and Price simply had the wrong target. The monument is not the problematic symbol they take it to be because it is nothing more than the occasion for them to realize their own sense of who they are and what they might become. If response does matter more than the object itself, then we are at a real loss to make sense of the vandalism as a response to some *thing* the vandals perceived as outside themselves, some *thing* which has such weight they cannot but take extreme action against it. Any sense we might try to make of the vandalism also becomes open to the range of interpretations each of us brings to it. If Graham is right when he suggests that each of us brings our own experiences to The Fist, we are at a loss to explain the actions of vandals whose experiences we do not share. We are unable to explain the vandalism as saying anything more about the vandals than it does about The Fist in particular or the landscape of race in Detroit in general. All this does is leave the AP reporter to search in vain beyond the monument itself, beyond the vandalism itself, even beyond Detroit itself, for some stable meaning and clear intention, some rhetorical bedrock that—always already buried deep beneath whatever might be said or written—forever eludes her.

But this line of thinking is not entirely right. It gives objects too little credit. Objects are more than featureless repositories of consequential responses. The Fist is more than an empty gesture. Yet when we search for meaning outside the object we make it into an empty gesture in need of interpretation to stabilize its signification and so to fill it with significance. The search for meaning need not lead us to stable answers to such questions as the AP reporter's about whether The Fist represents Black Power. It also need not end in finding material forces already there to exert themselves on and

overdetermine our interpretations. Isolating interpretation from object and allowing interpretations to proliferate simply conceals a more important question, a question the AP reporter could have asked, but did not: If The Fist can mean so much else—if it is, as its creator says, an open symbol—then how does it persist in representing Black Power? That one interpretation persists despite the instability of all interpretation is a real puzzle. It is a puzzle made all the more frustrating to solve because persistence and intractability so seem to thwart our efforts to engage each other more productively. We need to realize that the question of duration is not another version of the question: Why do people insist on seeing The Fist as representing Black Power? This version of the question begs us to identify an irresistible force—psychological or social or environmental—that overdetermines our rhetorical activities and causes us to persist in our interpretation despite ourselves. Carole Blair draws a similar conclusion from her experience with memorial sites, concluding that “they construct valenced reaction and depth of visitor experience that cannot be described, much less explained, in terms of their symbolism or by reference to the intentions of their makers” (Contemporary 50). To really solve the puzzle, we need to avoid the dilemma of forcing a choice between persistence and insistence. We need to give the object its due.

When we fail to give objects their due, when we oppose persistence of object to insistence on interpretation, we fail to consider that any object of rhetoric—or for that matter anything rhetorical—might be more than a mirror reflecting some idea that precedes it, shines through it, and exists despite our best efforts to change it. We fail to recognize meaning and significance are in the moment, in activities of interacting with others with and through objects. Black Power is not held in The Fist refusing to be

unclenched. Neither is it held unchanging in some definitive interpretation of The Fist. It is instead made and made to endure in an ongoing series of actions in the perpetual present, Cashman and Price's vandalism included.

Before proceeding to a discussion that gives objects their due, I want to be clear how rhetorical studies shares with Graham and the AP reporter their options for understanding The Fist as well as the vandalism of it: The shared view that either people insist on bringing their own interpretations to bear on a symbol such as The Fist or the symbol itself is a persistent representation, a manifestation of structures of meaning that imposes itself on people's interpretations. As a result of the articulation of interpretation and representation, rhetorical studies also fails to give the object its due and ends up caught in the same circular thinking that catches Graham and the AP reporter in a cycle of inevitability and idiosyncrasy. Of the work that has been done in rhetorical studies on monuments, Carole Blair and Neil Michel's studies of the Astronauts Memorial have best captures the circularity of thinking that fails to give objects their due.

On the one hand, Blair and Michel provide a detailed description of the Astronauts Memorial and its semiotic codes. They describe the features of the memorial and account for those features in terms of a contemporary rhetoric of commemoration. From their reading of the semiotics of the memorial they conclude "that the Astronauts Memorial draws from its generic predecessors in offering a culturally legible and appropriate commemoration, that it is symbolically rich and interesting, and that it bids for the kind of experience that appears to make contemporary commemoration 'work' for its audiences" (46). On the other hand, Blair and Michel cannot account for their observation that the commemoration does not seem to work. They cannot make sense of

visitors' persistent and consistent indifference to the semiotics of the memorial, that is, until they notice the visitors to the Astronauts Memorial in Cape Canaveral are visiting from Disney World. Turning their attention to the semiotics of Disney, Blair and Michel explain responses to the Astronauts Memorial as conditioned by a wholly different set of semiotic codes. The tropes of the theme park, not the tropes of commemoration, structure visitor expectations, making the interpretations grounded in those expectations incongruent with the commemorative representations of the memorial. Blair and Michel conclude from their insight into visitor behavior: "Had we not paid attention to that audience, we might have promoted, however inadvertently, the compellingly naive assumption that, since the Space Mirror *ought* to provide a fulfilling commemorative experience, that it actually *does*. To the extent that rhetorical study retains its almost exclusive focus on the context of production and the meanings generated symbolically in the product, and its inattention to experience and reception, it will be trapped in the dilemma of either rendering such a dubious conflation or having little or nothing to say about what discourse does" (68). I would agree the dilemma is one of making sense of what gets done with discourse, a matter of avoiding the dilemma of confusing an ought for an is. Blair and Michel conclude that visitors read the memorial as they do because, "To read it seriously entails that the visitor question the other texts that have rewarded her/his temporally contiguous experience. The most comfortable position for visitors is to simply avert attention, to retain the considerable reward offered by the other attractions, and to allow themselves to be distracted or distanced from the text of the Space Mirror" (67). To express it in terms of ought and is, the meanings generated in the landscape of Disney that ought to provide a theme park experience in fact do provide that experience,

even forty miles outside the Disney resort at the Astronauts Memorial. As I read their account of it, visitor response to the Astronauts Memorial persists as it does because it could not persist otherwise than it does in the theme park context, “That is, this text or landscape is forged by a sense of intertextualization on the part of the visitor. What s/he reads together composes and orders the landscape, offering specific ‘rules for reading’ that will construct and constrain her/his reading of its components” (59). Despite first appearances the responses of visitors to the memorial are not idiosyncratic, they are inevitable.

That said, I think Blair and Michel are onto something. Giving objects their due in rhetorical studies requires of us that we do attend to what gets done without appeal to an intentionality or a representation that overdetermines what ought to be done. As Blair has put it elsewhere the materiality of rhetoric leads us to look beyond these options for answers, “we must ask not just what a text means but, more generally what it does, and we must not understand what it does as adhering strictly to what it was supposed to do” (Contemporary 23). Attending to what gets done involves attention to physical actions, attention to the *things* that get done with discourse as well as attention to the *things* with which and through which discourse works. Again, as Blair has put it, “the material aspect of rhetoric does significant work to shape the character of rhetorical experience” (Contemporary 46). It is attention to the concreteness of embodied activity in its richest sense. It is attention to Cashman’s claim that he and Price wanted to unclench The Fist. They did not cover Monument to Joe Louis in white paint because they wanted to get people to view and understand the monument differently. Theirs was not simply an action in the realm of rhetoric. It was the monument itself, The Fist as object—not people’s

perceptions and interpretations of The Fist as symbol—that they targeted. Cashman was quite clear about it, they wanted to unclench The Fist.

In its most basic form this act of vandalism was iconoclastic, aimed at defiling both the object itself and its power of presentation as a prominent symbol of Detroit. As Robert Bevan puts it describing the motivations for destroying buildings during war, “Sometimes it is as if the very bricks and stones are guilty of being the other as well as being representative of the other’s presence” (14).⁶ Describing the vandalism as iconoclastic leads to ways of talking about the embodiment of rhetoric, providing an answer to the AP reporter’s question that avoids opposing the inevitability of representation to the idiosyncrasy of interpretation. W. J. T. Mitchell describes two beliefs essential for an iconoclastic gesture: “The first is that the image is transparently and immediately linked to what it represents. Whatever is done to the image is somehow done to what it stands for. The second is that the image possesses a kind of vital, living character that makes it capable of feeling what is done to it. It is not merely a transparent medium for communicating a message but something like an animated, living thing, an object with feelings, intentions, desires, and agency” (127). Cashman’s talk of unclenching The Fist by covering it in white paint betrays a characterization of the monument as vital, as more than medium carrying people’s responses to it. It is a living *thing* animated with agency, desire, feelings, and intentions.

Characterizing the vandalism as iconoclastic allows us to say Cashman’s talk of unclenching The Fist is more than an inarticulate and desperate attempt at justifying a criminal act. As Mitchell explains, perception of the object as vital, as somehow feeling the effects of our actions upon it, is more than primitive faith and naiveté. It is a feature

of the object itself as a thing within an order of things that evokes from us all empathic responses. We are all intimately familiar with our empathy for objects, as when we hesitate if we are told to gouge out the eyes in a family portrait. Despite the fact that most of us understand the pictures as mere images and do not believe in voodoo, we do hesitate. We hesitate damaging the photo not because we cling to the notion that what we do to the portrait gets done to the person. We hesitate because the portrait—while not the person—is more than a reproduction of the person’s image. Family portraits, like so many other artifacts, have agency for us. They have an effect on us, they do things for and to us. Yet the nature of that agency is hard to grasp.

Mitchell too hedges in his characterization of the agency of objects, invoking something of Graham’s view when he writes, “An image is not a text to be read but a ventriloquist’s dummy into which we project our own voice” (140). To some extent this is true. Images and objects are more than texts we read. We infuse them with meaning through our interactions with them. Family portraits mean what they mean and have the agency they have because we see our lives and our loves in them and doing so makes them matter to us. But this is not entirely it either, so Mitchell clarifies by using the example of commodities, “Their speech is not just arbitrary or forced upon them, but must be seen to reflect their inner nature as modern fetish objects. When I claim, then, that the offensive statement made by the image is actually projected there by the spectator, I don’t mean to say that the perception of this statement is merely mistake or misinterpretation” (140). I take this as more than an instance of Mitchell being evasive or wanting it both ways. As he puts it, there is a slippery slope “that leads back from idolatry, offensive images, desecration, and iconoclasm to the mere fact that human

beings seem to be inveterate makers of images—images which then seem to have ‘a mind of their own’ and get out of control” (141). Here Mitchell has evoked the same opposition between interpretation and representation, idiosyncrasy and inevitability, insistence and persistence invoked by Graham and the AP reporter and worked by Blair and Michel. Following Mitchell’s way of putting it, objects may be animated, and in this they may become fetish, but only by and with our intentions toward them. The Fist may be a fetish object in this sense, replete with agency and intentionality, but only because people fetishize it. Unfortunately this way of describing it does not take us beyond The Fist as Graham left it, as a repository for interpretations people bring to it. We are stuck without any productive way of saying why people insist on bringing the same interpretation over and over again, an interpretation that then lingers and resonates and transforms the object into that particular fetish. And I am left with not much to say to the AP reporter about the actions of Cashman and Price, except to say their vandalism was an attempt to break the spell of the fetish and to unclench The Fist.

Mitchell is surely right though that we cannot have intentions toward objects, objects cannot mean for us, they cannot even be for us as objects, except in and through our discursive and institutional orderings of them and ourselves. But this is not all of it. Interpretation and representation are not diametrically opposed projections. The representational agency of objects and our interpretive agency over objects emerge as they converge in a range of embodied activities. Objects may be ordered through activities of interpretation, but our relationships with objects are extensively and intensively embodied. Objects take up space and our bodies are our space. The space of our bodies moves around, away from, toward, sometimes with, and even through objects

in space. Certainly we realize our intentions toward objects only in these embodied encounters with them. At the same time objects in these encounters materialize an agency independent of our intentions toward them. They demand from us responses we might not otherwise have were it not for our encounters with them. Objects propel us and repel us and even compel us. I do not mean to imply Cashman and Price can pin blame for their vandalism on the provocation of The Fist itself. They do not get to relinquish their agency so easily. However I do mean to claim the vandalism of Monument to Joe Louis was more than Cashman and Price projecting their intentions onto a passive object. As more than mere object, as more than repository of human intention, The Fist does not get to so easily relinquish its agency either.

Pouring paint and placing pictures Cashman and Price were doing more than interrupting The Fist's projection of a representation. They were also doing more than projecting their own intention onto the bronze. I want to say instead that their engagement with the monument was projective. Not predetermined by either interpretation or representation, monument and vandals projectively engaged each other. Each reached out toward the other to meet in an underdetermined movement forward into embodying expression. Black Power wasn't in The Fist waiting for Cashman and Price to dislodge it. Whatever the monument might be said to represent, whatever the vandalism might be said to mean, emerged in the reach of each to the other. Of course this is not the way Cashman and Price wanted it. Their vandalism of The Fist claimed a representation for the object that they wanted to erase.

Bruno Latour coins the term "factishes" to address the iconoclast's claim that projection is lodged in the opposition between facts as things in the world and fetishes as

things in our minds. A factish is as much fact as fetish, an object with agency as well as intention. Latour points out that, “Iconoclasm does not break an idol, but destroys a way of arguing and acting that was anathema to the iconoclast. The only one who is projecting his feelings onto the idol is he, the iconoclast with the hammer, not those who by his gesture should be freed from their shackles” (Pandora’s 271). To say that it is the iconoclast who projects an interpretation onto the object is worth further attention here. Following Latour an obvious response to the AP reporter’s question about whether The Fist represents Black Power would be to say, “At least Cashman and Price thought so.”

As iconoclasts Cashman and Price wanted their projection to overdetermine their projective encounter with the monument. They wanted to unclench The Fist. They wanted to expose the brute matter of the monument, cleaving metaphysical fetish (a representation of Black Power) from empirical fact (bronze monument). If Cashman and Price had succeeded in unclenching The Fist, they would have succeeded in making it nothing more than a big piece of metal onto which they successfully project their message that the monument is not an appropriate symbol. But Cashman and Price were not successful, their act of vandalism served to further impute Black Power in the monument. Their iconoclasm could not isolate a meaning and remove them from the ambiguity of embodied rhetorical activity. In fact their vandalism of the monument only further mired Cashman and Price in the world with the object. After all it was the act of distinguishing fact of The Fist from fetish of Black Power that invited the AP reporter’s question about what the monument represents. Latour puts the unintended impact of iconoclasm this way, “Understood according to a fact-fetish dichotomy, the [bronze] immediately becomes a spirit, that is, a transcendent entity that obeys the *same*

specifications as an object of nature *except* that it is invisible” (Pandora’s 286). If they did anything, Cashman and Price reanimated the object by recalling our attention to its projection of Black Power.

Covering Monument to Joe Louis in white paint Cashman and Price did in a sense unclench The Fist. They unclenched it in the sense that they enacted a relationship with the object that isolated the fact of it from their fetishizing of it. Fetishizing it, they objectified it. Objectifying The Fist they enacted what I had earlier called a rhetorical agency of distance, commanding from afar the material resources of meaning making by trying to deny The Fist any agency of its own. They deny The Fist by physically performing on it a distinguishing of fact from fetish the very possibility of which invokes their participation in a conjoining factish. No one really doubts Monument to Joe Louis as a factish participates in projecting Black Power. I hesitate using a word like “represents” to describe the signifying of the monument because such terms derive from and reinforce the fact-fetish dichotomy, constraining our capacity to productively engage the agency of objects in our embodied interactions with them. Without question Cashman and Price physically engaged the agency of The Fist, a point we miss if we try to explain their actions in terms of representation. As Latour puts it, “What is it that iconoclasm breaks, and what is it that factishes allow us to restore? A certain theory of action and of mastery. Once the hammer has fallen, shattering the world into facts on the one side and fetishes on the other, nothing can stop the dual question from being posed: did you construct the thing yourself, or is it autonomous?” (Pandora’s 280). Through the vandals themselves, through the monument’s creator, through the AP reporter, the question is circulated because it is circular: Does The Fist represent Black Power? A rhetorical

question in the pejorative sense because those who ask it do not themselves doubt what The Fist represents. But they also do not accept the answer. Theirs is a question denying the capacity of the object itself to participate projectively in making meaning, theirs is a question that then cannot otherwise find for projection the permanent home they want for it, except in command from afar of rhetorical resources.

In rhetorical studies if we focus too much on the iconoclast's confrontation with the object's projectivity, we cannot turn our attention away from the dual question of idiosyncrasy or inevitability. To move beyond iconoclastic options requires less attention to the question of projection and more to matters of projectivity. It requires of us less focus on fixing responsibility and more attention to the question of responsiveness. As Patchen Markell puts it, we become paralyzed by "an excessive investment in having [our] acts reflect and express who [we] take [ourselves] to be," an investment that can at its worst, "feed modes of action that seek to suppress or manage worldly unpredictability, often by constraining others or compelling them to bear a disproportionate share of the risks of human interaction" (60). The concept of agency gets caught up in the same circularity as the concept of representation and the desire to fix in our recognition the object for what it is and ourselves for who we are. Such concerns actually lead us astray. Finality of representation and the specification of agency misrecognize a desire for invulnerability and inviolability as an established fact of sovereign agency. The iconoclast unclenching The Fist attempts to command the resources of rhetoric by displacing vulnerability onto the object. The vandals exert their aspirations to sovereignty by concentrating projective agency in themselves, a concentration that is as undesirable as it is unattainable. Unattainable because it remains trapped in circularity. Undesirable

because it ends in over-ambition. Opening and extending the hand of embodied rhetoric by giving the object its due requires of us that we embrace mutual vulnerability and forego the claim to agency we make when we project our sovereignty over objects. Substituting our willingness for willfulness. Here the concern is less with the agency of a subject and the forces that subjectify and more with being subject to acting and being acted upon.

Letting go the concern for laying claim to agency in favor of inviting our vulnerability to embodied interactions with objects, Brian Massumi observes that objects are not objective, they are projective, “Before and after it becomes an object, it is an inexhaustible reserve of surprise. The real is the snowballing *process* that makes a certainty of *change*.” A little further on he adds, “The object has a life cycle. It passes from the ‘ultimate fact’ of its unexpected arrival to the status of ‘factoid’ that is felt to be (and can be) meaningfully discussed but requires further investigation to determine precisely what manner of object it is and what is to be done with it” (*Parables* 214). Encounters between objects such as The Fist and subjects such as Cashman and Price are projective. We project onto objects their objectivity through our claims to sovereignty over them. Objects project back to us our subjectivity. While projectivity can provoke it can also evoke. Evocation lets go the willfulness of agency and representation. It draws on traits that persist across encounters of objects and subjects without insisting on the persistence of those traits. As vulnerability rhetoric causes willfulness of representation to persist while also insisting on the willingness to mean more.

In terms of the specific question asked by the AP reporter about The Fist representing Black Power, as well as the general problem raised by her question of giving

an account of embodied rhetoric, the resources made available through Mitchell, Latour, Massumi, and Markell encourage us toward the task of developing vocabularies of projectivity that keep fact and fetish subject as well as responsive to each other. These would be vocabularies not of rhetorical agency but of rhetorical vulnerability. Rather than bringing to bear an account of an expression that claims facticity for itself, the vocabulary of embodied rhetoric highlights our availability to the projective contingency of events. Vulnerability to the moment of a rhetorical event is more than openness to circumstance. Vulnerability is an activity, a making do⁷ in the conjoined mental and physical worlds of embodied expression. The agency of expression may be impossible to isolate, spread as it is across agents both human and nonhuman. But as Markell has described it in terms of our public lives together, isolating the location of agency is counterproductive. The agency created through and shared with factishes has no origin, no source beyond the embodied encounter itself. It lives in the event as the availability, the responsiveness, of ourselves and objects to each other.

Recognizing the Monument to Joe Louis is a factish (or factoid) provides a way of arguing and acting grounded in making do in our vulnerability. It provides a way of rearticulating the AP reporter's question about whether The Fist represents Black Power into a question regarding our availability to the object and the object's availability to us. Latour uses the term "dingpolitik" to refer to this availability. "Dingpolitik" is an assemblage of people with matter(s)—both physically tangible and conceptually immediate. Matters of concern and the matter we care about--objects such as The Fist--generate a "pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. . . . Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute" (From 15). As a

projective provocation the trigger is far from automatic. Objects do not possess an inherent and obvious projection of their facticity. They avail themselves to us as we avail ourselves to them, articulating this availability becomes the concern of theoretical discourse of embodied rhetoric. Blair concludes that rhetorical theory must account for the physical presence of memorials as laying claim on our attention and thereby potentially setting agendas for matters of concern (Contemporary 35-36). Latour's conclusion is that, "an object-oriented democracy should be concerned as much by the procedure to detect relevant parties as to the methods to bring into the center of the debate the proof of what it is to be debated. This second set of procedures to bring the object of worry has several old names: eloquence, or more pejoratively, rhetoric, or even more derogatory, sophistry" (From 18). Objects of worry. Passionate dispute. Passion and worry. Keeping object and agency and interpretation together turns our attention away from isolatable agency and identifiable significance, away from the ambition for sovereignty toward the energy and activity of embodied expression, the sensation of being open and responsive to concern, worry, and passion, as it emerges on the surface of that which matters and that which has matter, our embodied encounters with objects in the present.

The Fist projects itself toward us as an object of concern we are vulnerable to. It is a gesture with volume, it occupies space, it asserts itself in the landscape. Cashman and Price wanted to unclench The Fist, to dissipate the volume and substance of agency balled up in the clenched bronze hand. As an object of rhetoric The Fist is not a fixed entity given over to some static meaning that lies hidden elsewhere. It is an object in the world vulnerable to our encounters with it, an object we are vulnerable to as well.

Expression flows through that vulnerability, forming in embodied acts, like the act of covering the monument in white paint. Such acts set loose upon us a provocation that grabs and takes hold of our attention in any number of ways—delighting us, enraging us, or disgusting us—just as the reach of the object pulls us in or pushes us away, sometimes in spite of our vulnerability to it.

There is no getting behind or beneath embodied encounters with objects. Nor would we want to get behind or beneath those encounters if we want to imagine the possibility of unclenching our fists. No amount of interrogation or explanation can provide better insight or a more accurate account of what happened or what it meant. Objects are like words in this way. They provoke response. They are experienced. They are all right there, flowing into each other while being filtered through the perceptual organization of our interactions with them. While we do have some choice in our experiencing, there are some objects that so provoke us, so persist in their singularity, inviting more and varied embodied responses, that they become controversial, exemplary, or puzzling. Other objects become mundane, some almost immediately. Still others are drained of their provocation only over an extended period of time. Mundane objects are present everywhere unnoticed. Indifferent to them, they do not present themselves to us. They have no presence for us. We move through and around them without regard. Controversial objects like *The Fist* have a presence of provocation that endures. They are here and now, not to be ignored. Or at least we cannot ignore them. Such presence is not isolatable, it is a welling up of evocation in act and object. The task of theories of embodied rhetoric is to trace the intensity and duration of rhetorical energy, to follow the projective ebb and flow of expressive energy through human bodily activities: through

gesture, through contact with and manipulation of objects, through movement through space.

Intention, meaning, and significance are not givens. They reside nowhere. They are provocations we enact. Through our gesturing, handling, moving we are provoked and we provoke each other. We make our world present to ourselves and we make ourselves present in the world to each other. Perceiving certain of the features of our presence we make a sense of the world, of other people and other things. We make sense of ourselves as present to and with all that occupies us. We grasp the matter that matters.

So what about that gesture?

More than once I have asked myself whether I could have come up with a more quotable answer to the AP reporter's question had I only thought about it long enough and hard enough. I have answered this question by believing that, faced with a journalist's deadline, I did not have the time, nor did I have the rhetorical skill, to come up with a quotable response. I simply could not say anything that made sense to her. While there may be some truth to this, I think there is more to it than that. As I put it above, her question had no satisfying answer in large part because her question did not really make sense to me as a question about the racialization of objects, spaces, and people. It was a question about static representation, a question about whether Black Power is there in *The Fist* or not. Her question simply did not get to the real matter at hand. Rhetoric is not static, it is dynamic and fluid, an event and an embodied encounter of humans with objects. To understand *The Fist* and make sense of its being vandalized

requires a perspective and vocabulary that makes sense of the flow of rhetoric without distorting our sensation of the event.

Commentaries on rhetorical acts, as well as theories of rhetoric, cannot by themselves make full sense of the embodied sensation of what we perceive as rhetoric. What confounded me as the unanswerability of the AP reporter's question was the request for me to make sense of a gesture, to project a sense onto it that the question assumes the gesture itself does not otherwise have. Any answer to that question would have created a dissonance. Any answer she would have been satisfied with would have been an answer that literally "makes sense," an answer that manufactures an explanation for some thing that is not expected to explain itself. There really is no one explanation that makes sense of what Cashman and Price did. The closest we may get to an explanation may be Cashman's claim that they wanted to "unclench the fist." But even this expression of intent is already too far removed from the embodied act of vandalism. Like the cab driver who saw Cashman and Price vandalize the monument, followed them, and called police on his cell phone, the immediate performance of racialization in Detroit is embodied in a singularity that has its own sense and sensation. To make sense of embodied acts of rhetoric beyond the sense they make is in a real sense to sensationalize those acts, to make a sense for them they did not have in and of themselves.

We all move through spaces of multiple scale everyday, often by means of manipulating objects. And we gesture as we occupy or move through spaces, with our gestures adjusting in response to perceptions of a space. Our gestures, our manipulation of objects, our occupation of space are activities in the present through which we engage the world with our bodies, bringing the features of both world and bodies into awareness

of each other. The problem of people crafting for themselves lives lived together in contemporary urban and progressively more democratic spaces is a problem of the embodiment of rhetoric. It is a problem of giving objects their due by recognizing the immediacy of what matters: the persuasiveness and coerciveness of our bodily activities. The urge to find motives and explanations outside embodiment is born of a disregard for our actions and expressions and interactions. It is an urge that locks us into either the constraints of social space or the failings of personal motivation. Giving objects their due does not so much ground rhetoric in materiality as much as it forces us to let go the privileging of our accounts and drives us to recognize the integrity of embodiment and rhetoric, an integrity we cannot interrupt if we are to respond productively to it and reflect meaningfully on it.

Cashman knew he and Price could only, in his words, “in a sense . . . unclench the fist.” Vandalizing *The Fist*, covering it in white paint, unclenching it in a sense, Cashman and Price acted on the persistence of racialization in a way that only further affirmed the rhetorical dilemma of divisiveness. Like officers Budzyn and Nevers who beat to death Malice Greene because he would not unclench his fist, concentrating the assertion of authority in their actions only tightened the grip of antagonism. For theories of rhetoric to enable movement beyond divisiveness they must conceptualize actions and justifications and objects and interpretations as something more than the trail of a human agent. Our theories of rhetoric must give the objects in the world their due. We must give up assertions of agency for the contingencies of vulnerability. We must find ways to answer the question of what *The Fist* represents without falling back on textual vocabularies and strategies. The object projects itself in its brute stability through and past our projections

of intentions and interpretations toward it. These points converge in some vanishing horizon we do not ever actually visualize. Fixing some projective point before that horizon by claiming that the monument represents this or that, or by pouring paint on it, we may make sense of the object, but we do so at the cost of displacing our sensation of it. We narrow and limit the object's projection. We narrow and limit our potential for engaging it differently. We seem to become powerless to unclench our fists. The answer then to the AP reporter's question, Does The Fist represent Black Power? Yes, so long as someone insists it doesn't and wants to unclench it.

Endnotes

1. On the notion of racialization of rhetoric through privileged distance, see “The Closed Fist of Rhetoric”
2. Because I am less concerned with the monument as object in and of itself and more concerned with the interactions of the vandals with the monument and the rhetorical issues raised for me by their actions, I only draw as needed on the literature in the rhetorical studies of monuments. For a full review of this line of research see Blair, “Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places.”
3. On the interconnections of race and violence and rhetoric in this particular case, see “Police Violence and Denials of Rhetoric.”
4. I am not intending to oppose coercion to persuasion in any way. Understanding persuasion, or rhetoric, as embodied, as an immediately lived experience, blurs the line separating it from some other of brute physical force. Instead, persuasion and coercion seep into and around each other.
5. Which is not to say that an artist could never imagine vandalism as a response. In fact some artists have built the invitation to vandalize their art into the work itself. In addition developments in media have allowed a greater interactivity with art objects than captured by Graham. See Hansen. Also Mitchell.
6. Bevan argues that the appearance and perceived power of any given meaning in a monument or building is a function of commonly shared or collective memories that emerge “where individual memories interact within a framework provided by societal memory” (16).

7. Latour's term, "making do," recalls Herbert Simon's influential term, "satisficing." If "making do" is really nothing more than "satisficing," then the concept of "making do" is subject to the same criticisms as have been leveled against satisficing. I do not consider this possibility here. On the concept of "satisficing," see Simon. For a good discussion of the problems with satisficing, see Forester.

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