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Chris Ingraham, **Gestures of Concern**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, 264 pp., $99.95 (hardcover), $26.95 (paperback).

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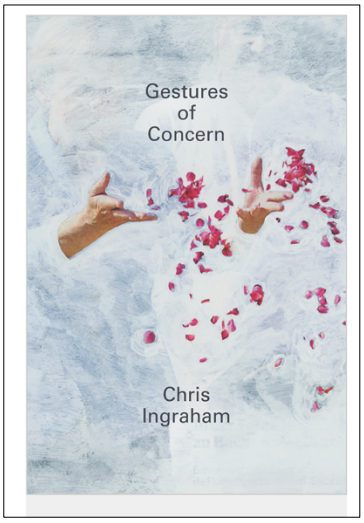

At the very beginning of Chris Ingraham's new book, ***Gestures of Concern***, we are directed to "consider the idiot" (p. 23). In an age where we are bombarded in our daily news with various forms of denial regarding the taken-for-granted facts of our social, cultural, and political lives, it may seem that perhaps too much consideration is already being given to idiots. The author, though, asks us to think of idiocy somewhat differently:

> The idiot does not know the best way to proceed from contingency to contingency. To the question of what's best for the so-called common good, the idiot draws a blank. The idiot doesn't have *the* answer to much of anything. What the idiot offers instead is hesitancy, an interstice . . . By refusing to be conclusive and decisive, the idiot holds open a space to think the indeterminate as a way of acknowledging that *the* common is only and ever *a* common. (p. 25)

The notion of the idiot here is drawn from Greek sources where the *idotai* were the (sometimes) silent partners to the *rhetores* performances. Idiocy in Ingraham's telling is not, therefore, synonymous with the moronic, the ignorant, or even the deplorable but instead is the inverse of the rhetor, "the politically active citizen invested in the power of speech to help find and mobilize a 'common good'" (p. 23). The idiot though, is not, as this definition might seem to suggest, silent but instead speaks, if that is the right word, through the theme of Ingraham's work: the gesture of concern.

The gestures that Ingraham (2020) wisely calls our attention to are: "actions whose efforts typically yield no perceptible effect, while nevertheless building the affective conditions in which more deliberative modes of engagement might gain some purchase" (p. 26). Such gestures include a wide range of sites and artifacts including the rules of composition for TED Talks, stickers, varying forms of aesthetic production and criticism, and perhaps most compellingly, community-building around libraries. Importantly, *Gestures of Concern* draws our attention to a panoply of seemingly inconsequential but nonetheless potent sites where such conditions can be constructed: the greeting card, the embodied gesture, the social media affirmation. The thread that holds these disparate ephemera together is that all of them express, to varying degrees, a sense of concern, "a way to talk about the constant activity of being affected by scenes of investment beyond one's conscious control" (p. 27).

What these idiots produce through such seemingly inconsequential tokens of care for our shared social world are *affects.* Drawing on a variety of affect theorists, Ingraham carefully delineates the

vanishingly thin line between affect and ordinary pathos. Affect appears as a shared cultural substrate that exists prior to its emotional realization through language or other forms of symbolization. The author states, "Affect accordingly operates as a kind of shared reservoir wherein the potential for incipient meaning pools up, until, overflowing, it becomes personal in the form of feelings, social in the form of emotions" (p. 40). As this definition makes clear, and Ingraham acknowledges, affects are challenging to talk about. They belong less to the realm of the rhetorical and more to the poetic. Correspondingly, the book concludes with a reflection on an essay by W. H. Auden and suggests contemporary modifications to the social/cultural changes the poet identified in the middle part of the 20th century. The modifications function as, if not a theory, then perhaps the rudiments of a framework for examining gestures of concern, those fleeting but still crucial interventions that participate as a shared but inchoate resource for other, more clearly discursive, articulations of shared concern.

As might be clear from the preceding discussion, the notion of affect presented here proved difficult for me. I struggled with this review longer than I should have, but events transpired that somehow crystallized the concept in my mind. I live in Michigan, just a few miles from Oxford, where recently another one of "Bifo" Berardi's (2015) "heroes" murdered four of his classmates, injured several more (including the brother of one of my students) and left a community reeling in the aftermath. An entire apparatus of by now familiar gestures was deployed and has textured life in this community over these last several weeks: candlelight vigils; fundraising efforts; flags flown at half-staff; signs that announce "We Stand with Oxford," we are "Oxford Strong," or "We are all Wildcats"; those ubiquitous ribbons now adorned in the school colors of blue and gold; and, of course, the never-ending "thoughts and prayers." Every confrontation with one of these signs, on my daily commute, a morning run, doing errands, produces what I now recognize, due to my encounter with Ingraham's work, as an affect: an unnamable chaos of sense that defies even the most complex efforts to symbolize, to take possession or some measure of control over them. I think, though, that this is less the case that this sense precedes language than that it is perhaps so thoroughly suffused with emotional states—rage, despair, exhaustion, revulsion, comfort, camaraderie—all lay claim at once in no organized or perhaps organizable "structure of feeling," save perhaps for plain Burkean guilt.

As Ingraham points out: "Not all public gestures are affirmative or inclusive, of course. All too many are negative and exclusionary—and often marked by hostility and recalcitrance" (p. 188). This, I think, is short-sighted. The gestures I describe above are certainly intended to be affirmative and inclusive, but as expressions they produce affects that are beyond the binary of affirmative/negative or inclusive/exclusionary. They are at once infuriating and consoling, sorrowful and reassuring. This book draws our attention precisely to such indeterminateness and asks that we attend to it, take it seriously, and recognize it as part of our "affective commonwealth" (p. 2). The fact that they are both/and instead of either/or only makes the matter more urgent.

Finally, as regards urgency, it is also important to attend to the negative, the exclusionary, and the recalcitrant. In this little affective commonwealth, I pass by all manner of gestures regarding concerns for matters I might deem negative: window clings that show AR assault-type rifles in diminishing sizes (Daddy gun, Mommy gun, etc.) or the familiar shape of my state (a mitten) grasping a semiautomatic pistol. And, the day after the shooting at Oxford, while driving home and trying to explain to my 13-year-old son

that the Second Amendment does not in fact protect a person's right to murder his classmates (all evidence to the contrary), I saw a sticker that read:

> *Live, Laugh, Love* (printed in swirling script)
> and if that doesn't work
> **Load, Aim, Fire.** (printed in clear block letters)

Such expressions undoubtedly contribute to our affective commonwealth every bit as much as the more positive messages analyzed in Ingraham's work. It may be the case that for some, those who are similarly armed perhaps, these messages are inclusive and affirming, but that inclusivity would be, at best, tense. The affect would be one of omnipresent threat, even if held in abeyance due to an uncertainty regarding the armature of the presumed other. It is for just such reasons that Ingraham's work demands our attention as rhetorical and communication scholars and provides valuable resources for the examination of rhetorical sites outside the extraverted performances of the typical rhetor.

Reference

Berardi, F. (2015). *"Heroes": Mass murder and suicide*. New York, NY: Verso.