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Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric: What's at Stake?

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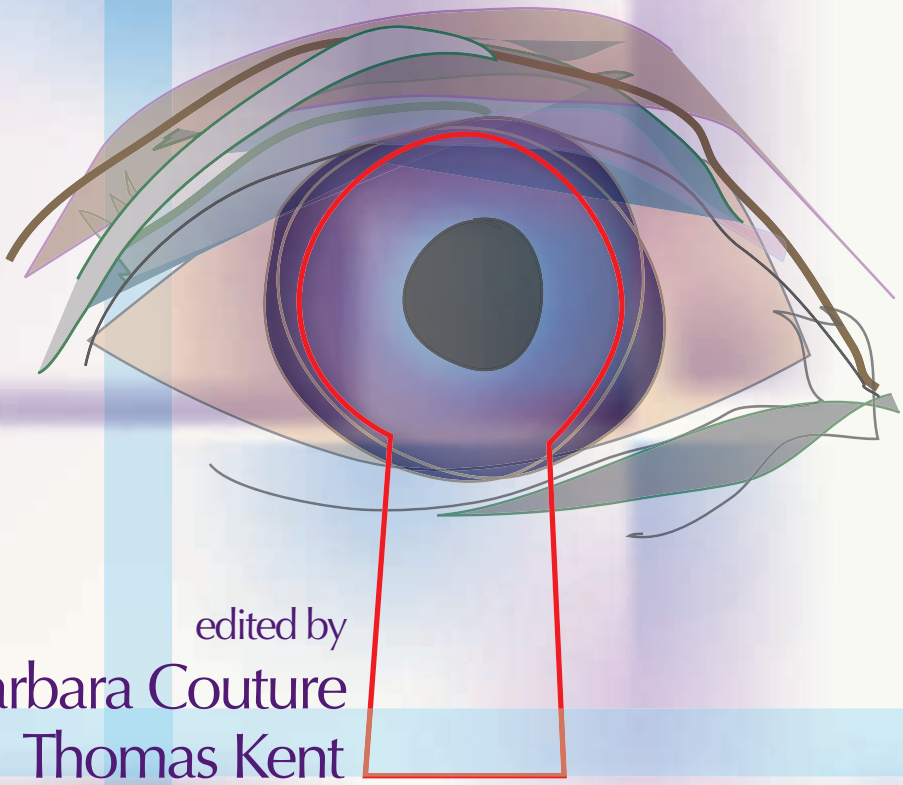
the private, the public, and the published

Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric



edited by
Barbara Couture
Thomas Kent

THE PRIVATE, THE PUBLIC, AND THE PUBLISHED

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Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric

edited by

BARBARA COUTURE
THOMAS KENT

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PREFACE

We live in an era where communication is virtually ubiquitous. The joys and hazards of living in a small town where everybody knows you are quickly becoming a reality for everyone. Television, the internet, cell phones, and a host of new communications technologies assure that anyone who does not already know you can quickly find out all about you. Indeed, as television exposés and Internet Web sites with streaming voice and video have revealed, if we wish, we can make everything we say and do available to nearly everyone. This ubiquity of access to personal communication has begun to blur the boundary of the private and the public. What meanings and consequences do our words have in a world in which there appears to be little that is private? Can and should our personal lives be separate from our public rhetoric? Indeed, what connection is there between what we privately think and how we publicly communicate with others? And what implications do our answers to these questions have for how we interact with others as speakers and writers?

This anthology contains sixteen essays by scholars in the fields of rhetoric, communication, and critical theory who examine the ways in which concepts of the private relate to public communication. The first essay, Barbara Couture's "Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric: What's at Stake?," serves as an introduction to this volume and addresses one of the central questions inherent in our attempts to reconcile private lives with public rhetoric: Does the blending of the private and the public in speech and writing contribute to the public good? The fifteen essays that follow Couture's introduction employ a wide variety of disciplinary and philosophical perspectives concerning the nature of private lives and public rhetorics, but each essay in its own way asks us to consider, as Couture phrases it, the ramifications of "saying that private lives, identities, and values remain out of the sphere of public rhetoric and, in contrast, in making a private value the standard for public rhetoric."

To address the central topic of this book—the intersections and the interactions of private lives and public rhetorics—we have organized the chapters of this volume thematically into four segments. The first segment,

"Public Expression Meets Private Experience," contains four chapters that address the complex interplay between our private lives and our public expressions in divergent social realms such as politics, jazz, and medicine. In the first chapter, "Ain't Nobody's Business? A Public Personal History of Privacy After *Baird v. Eisenstadt*," Nancy Welch examines milestone legal decisions concerning the protections of privacy, decisions that liberalized access to birth control information and devices and created a shift from what Welch calls the "politics of the personal" to the "politics of *privacy*." In "Virtuosos and Ensembles: Rhetorical Lessons from Jazz," Gregory Clark argues that the private jazz performance, although improvisational, may be understood nonetheless as a rhetorical model that teaches us "something about how private intention can be rendered publicly useful." In chapter three, "Keeping the World Safe for Class Struggle: Revolutionary Memory in a Postmarxist Time," John Trimbur describes what he terms "revolutionary memory" and explains how revolutionary memory might enable us to think beyond national borders and "articulate a program to extend literacy and the higher learning" to anyone who seeks a college education. In the final chapter of this segment, "Mary Putnam Jacobi and the Speaking Picture," Susan Wells examines Mary Putnam's personal fascination concerning the relation between word and image and how Putnam's experiments in visual representation reveal a medical "truth about the tempo and structure of complex bodily processes, particularly as they were actively constructed by human beings in displays and experiments."

Part two of this book, "Confronting the Public and the Private in Written Language," concentrates directly on the problematic intersection of private experience and public expression within the academy and within the academic disciplines that constitute our colleges and universities. In "The Collective Privacy of Academic Language," David Bleich points out that "in the history of the academy, only one sense of privacy has existed, the collective privacy of the male group," a group "bound together by a language few others in society knew." Bleich concludes his chapter by arguing that this limited sense of privacy and the privileged academic language that is allowed by this limited sense of privacy can no longer be assumed to be necessary, in that no justification now exists "for not letting the language speak of all the constituencies now entering the university." Addressing issues concerning the essay as

a genre—issues central to the discipline of English studies—the second chapter in this segment, Lynn Bloom's "The Essayist In—and Behind—the Essay: Vested Writers, Invested Readers," argues that the work of canonical essayists is qualitatively different from the work of other essayists, and "[i]f more teachers wrote essays, or academic articles with presence that acknowledged their authorial investment, they would be better able to teach students not only the craft but the art" of the essay genre. In the third chapter of this segment, "Upon the Public Stage: How Professionalism Shapes Accounts of Composing in the Academies," Cheryl Geisler explores the ways in which writers construct professional identities, and she argues that professionalization shapes "the very language with which we account for our work, the daily stories we and our students tell of our progress in the academy, the stories through which we shape our identities." The final chapter of this segment investigates the role of the individual within groups of collaborative writers, an issue centrally important to a variety of academic disciplines. In his chapter "Ethical Deliberation and Trust in Diverse-Group Collaboration," Geoffrey Cross argues that common trust drives successful collaboration and that we frequently need to go beyond the logos of collaboration into the ethos or "spirit" of collaboration.

Part three, "Public and Private Identities in Popular and Mass Communication," brings together three chapters that investigate the role that personal identity and private experience play in a world dominated by popular media, especially the Internet. The first chapter of this segment, Douglas Hesse's "Identity and the Internet: The Telling Case of Amazon.com's Top 50 Reviewers," provides a provocative analysis of the process employed by Amazon.com to review the products sold through its Web site. In "The Influence of Expanded Access to Mass Communication on Public Expression: The Rise of Representatives of the Personal," David Kaufer investigates another aspect of mass communication. Kaufer poses the intriguing question, "What is public expression and what properties does it confer to ordinary expression?," and he concludes that "our increased access through technology has weakened the ties between ourselves as individuals and has further weakened our attention to one another's messages." In the concluding chapter of this segment, Marguerite Helmers, in "Private Witness and Popular Imagination," describes the "personal narrative of trauma," and she provides a remarkable analysis of several mass-media accounts

of the 1996 "disaster season," when several professional and amateur climbers died while attempting to scale Mt. Everest.

The final section of this book, "The Public and the Private in the Discipline of Composition Studies," concentrates on the important debate regarding what has come to be called the "personal turn" now occurring in the areas of rhetoric and composition studies. In his investigation of this topic, Bruce Horner in "Mixing It Up: The Personal in Public Discourse" argues that the "confusion over what constitutes the *personal* . . . prevents us from more productive engagement with the personal in public discourse, in both our writing and our teaching." In "Cultural Autobiographics: Complicating the 'Personal Turns' in Rhetoric and Composition Studies," Krista Ratcliffe reviews the two "personal turns" that have occurred within the discipline of composition studies. She argues that "these two personal turns, though related, generate debates with different histories, definitions, and stakes," and she concludes her chapter "by imagining how autobiography theory, particularly a concept of cultural autobiographics, may productively complicate our field's thinking about 'personal turns.'" Addressing what he takes to be the false distinction between public and private discourse held by many scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition studies, Sidney Dobrin in "Locating Public/Private Discourse" argues that the reductive distinctions between public and private discourses often limit our understanding of communication, and he concludes that "[a]ny discourse, no matter what we chose to label it for the sake of convenience . . . is, then, always already public." In the final chapter, "Public Writing and Rhetoric: A New Place for Composition," Christian R. Weisser investigates some of the pedagogical ramifications of the personal turn, and he concludes with the observation that "[if] we wish to create assignments, courses, and pedagogies that enable students to interact more effectively with other groups and individuals in public arenas, we could begin by considering where and to whom meaningful and productive public writing might be delivered."

Taken as a whole, the chapters in this volume define, dissolve, and bridge the gaps that distinguish the private and the public as epiphenomena that have implications for theorizing and practicing rhetoric and composition studies. These chapters also serve as an important first step toward a better and more nuanced understanding of the intersections and interactions between private experience and public expression, and

perhaps more important, these chapters stand as excellent examples of the informed, lively, and often controversial conversations that currently animate the disciplines of rhetoric and composition studies.

Thomas Kent
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1

RECONCILING PRIVATE LIVES AND PUBLIC RHETORIC

What's at Stake?

Barbara Couture

"I tried it, but I didn't inhale." It is hard not to smile at the irony of former president Bill Clinton's wan attempt to place himself on the right side of the law in public when disclosing his private use of marijuana. And the irony is doubly inflected for us, knowing—as we do now—about his duplicitous public admission that he never "had sex" with Monica Lewinsky. Perhaps there is no figure in American life for whom private life and public rhetoric are more intertwined than for our nation's president. This consequence of public life in America's most visible office is well known and well accepted.

Lately, the conflation of private life with public rhetoric has become the norm for many of us in far less visible positions, with interesting and perhaps problematic consequences. Some intrusions of public discourse into private life are legislated and involuntary: none of us who travel by air nowadays escape the public questions of a stranger about the contents of our baggage, questions often accompanied by a search of our most intimate personal belongings—including our persons!—amid a crowd of onlookers. Other such intrusions are voluntary: some of us cheerfully encourage the ubiquitous distribution of our private dalliances in public chat rooms on the Internet, for instance.

Whether by wish or by force, there is no question that private lives are increasingly becoming the subject of public expression. Consider the following (far from exhaustive) list of examples:

1. The rock star Ozzie Osbourne's family life, displayed on television twenty-four hours a day, became one of the most popular American shows.
2. A new illness, now treated by psychiatrists, is "Internet addiction"; it involves the obsessive desire of individuals to talk about themselves in public chat rooms to strangers online.

3. TV, radio, and Internet talk-show hosts invite individuals to review intimate details of their private lives in forums for public discussion.
4. Increased electronic access to personal data allows news services, consumer outlets, and government agencies to "learn" more about private citizens, with thousands of nameless employees tailoring services to private individuals, often without their direct knowledge, and contacting them by phone, mail, or e-mail.
5. Academics who teach online courses report exhaustive involvement in public e-mail discussions of individual students' responses—often personal—to classroom materials, discussions viewed by entire classes.

The increased forced and voluntary opportunities to make the private doings of many or most of us the subject of public rhetoric have consequences for its function, content, and form—consequences that not only provide topics of interest for scholars and challenges for teachers of writing and speech, but that also affect the potential utility of public rhetoric in the service of the common good.

One could argue, of course, that rhetoric, by definition, is not necessarily an art in service of the common good; by far, its most common interpreted function is "persuasion"—with no assumption made as to whether the goal is to persuade for good or ill. Yet in the grand tradition of classical humanistic education, the aim of teaching the rhetorical arts has always been and today remains to prepare students to contribute to the public good. James Zappen, for one, made the point convincingly over a decade ago, arguing for a "pluralistic rhetoric" in the teaching and writing of technical and managerial discourse that encourages writers to serve organizational goals while relating decision making to the greater good (Zappen 39).

The question for our contributors, responding in this volume to the growing tendency to confuse and conflate private lives with public rhetoric, is this: Does this blending of the private and the public in speech and writing contribute to the public good? Or is increased confusion over the boundaries of the public and the private in communication a bad thing? In the discussion that follows, I suggest that this increased fusing of the private and public does not bode well for public rhetoric; it does not lead to expression that contributes to the public good. In making this argument, I will define the consequences of conflating private life with public expression, giving contemporary examples of how public expression that is confused with private life obliterates the possibility

of public rhetoric—that is, communication for the public good. Referring to the scholarship of philosophers and rhetoricians, I will argue further that public expression that functions effectively as public rhetoric requires a reconciliation of private concerns with the ethical demand of relating to others, concluding with some examples of approaches to the study and teaching of rhetoric that meet this aim.

CONFLATING PRIVATE LIVES AND PUBLIC EXPRESSION

We have many amusing and some pathetic examples of the tendency of some individuals to make their private lives the subject of ubiquitous public expression. Cited earlier was the "glass house" example of Ozzie Osbourne and his family, whose public exposure of their private lives has led many to conclude that the rich and famous—at least those who appear to have grown up on the same side of the tracks as we—are not all that different. They argue, curse their spouses and children, do goofy things, have disgusting personal habits, and harbor questionable prejudices—just like us. As Internet users, we have daily access to the twenty-four-hour "Webcams" of persons who have invited us into their rooms, the personal Web pages and diaries of yet others, and the dominators of public chat rooms who reveal their personal likes and dislikes to hundreds.

Such voluntary exposés of private life on the public scene are not new: we are all familiar with the appeals of the lovelorn and love-happy in newspaper want ads and with the occasional ebullient suitor who sky-writes a declaration of love or proposal of marriage. All of these public expressions of private business appear quite harmless, though perhaps annoying. Yet even voluntary "harmless" exposure of private life in the public forum can have deleterious consequences. Many find worrisome, for instance, the talk-show exposés of Jerry Springer and Jenny Jones, where individuals choose to reveal personal secrets before millions of onlookers whose prurient interest is piqued by the emotional trauma that enfolds before their eyes when the speaker's relatives and friends learn as we do about the speaker's faults and transgressions.

What is common to these examples of private life revealed in public expression is the effort to use identity as a way to reach and influence someone else. The aim is either to erase the distinction between the communicator and the audience—there being nothing private about me that is not shared with you—or to confront an audience with one's

identity, as does the talk-show guest, revealing secrets that effectively reduce the significance of someone else in public.

In short, this conflation of private life with public expression demands that the audience absorb, deny, refuse, or obliterate difference, specifically what is different from the identity of the speaker. Ozzie Osbourne's family and the twenty-four-hour Webcam hosts have imposed their lives on the public, giving us the options of finding ourselves to be the same as Ozzie or the Webcam host, denying or refusing affiliation with the likes of them, or obliterating them by simply "turning them off." Such communication of one's private life as an expression to the public does not contribute to a development of some shared understanding of what it is to be human because there is no shared effort on the part of either the exposer or the voyeur to reach a mutual understanding of this communication.

Private life that functions as public expression in the modes just described poses no unavoidable threat: we can always choose not to participate in the imposed assimilation of or conflict with the private identity being thrust upon us. But what happens when private lives conveyed through public expression become representative—exclusively—of the interests and welfare of others? In short, when a public expression of private life becomes the standard for public participation? This phenomenon has been treated by a number of prominent scholars lately, notably by Jacques Derrida in his philosophical treatise on the ancient concept of friendship as a form of identity politics that was opposed to democracy. In composition studies, Dianne Rothleder similarly has explored private identity as a substitute for public expression as this substitution figures in rhetorical theory and writing pedagogy.

In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida tells us that the classical valorization of personal friendship as a virtuous activity—one that assumes accepting a person as a friend, unconditionally, despite his or her faults and regardless of reciprocal devotion—had a dark side that intruded upon public political life. He explores what he claims to have been Nietzsche's nagging question about the nature of friendship, that is, how does one maintain a friend without having enemies, without identifying those who are excluded from the circle of friendship? Derrida extends this concern to the framework of public policy: to define the bonds between compatriots as friendship is to assume that those outside this bond are enemies of the state. The classical concept of friendship held these consequential political overtones.

Nietzsche, claims Derrida, was also troubled by the classical conception of friendship, seeing there a contradiction that calls into question not only the antithesis of friendship and enmity, but also by extension all antitheses, including good and evil, truth and error. Nietzsche was obsessed with a comment on friendship often repeated by Aristotle, and later noted by Montaigne, that Aristotle had attributed to a sage who lay dying: the old wise man whispers to a young friend, "O my friend, there is no friend." Derrida claims that Nietzsche found this comment so intriguing because it disguises a truth about friendship as classically conceived.

The sage says to his friend that there is no friend because friendship cannot exist without the possibility of enemies. To believe in enemies is to hold the possibility of friendship. But a deeper truth concealed in this phrase, suggests Nietzsche, is one far more maddening: friendship, unconditional friendship, hides from truth. True friends ignore the faults of one another, keeping a silence that is required to keep friends, to close a circle against a presumed enemy. The closed classical conception of friendship involves, as Derrida tells us, "making each other laugh about evil. Among friends" (56). We do not need to look far for contemporary examples of this kind of friendship, a friendship closed to truth. Abuse of others handily persists in the name of friendship, by those who count one another as friends against others: be they a nation such as Nazi Germany, a faction such as the ultraconservative Right, or a family that disowns a son or daughter for living a life to which its other members cannot subscribe.

What defines this kind of friendship is a closed and singular identity, a private circle of like minds, exclusive of others. This is what friendship means when self and others are linked through an exclusive bond of identity. Because it is based in loving, this kind of friendship has the moral force of virtue—yet it is a love that categorically excludes difference. It is a love that, when practiced by many, obliterates the possibility of democracy and a public forum that acknowledges and respects difference.

The forced or voluntary display of private life as public expression can have the same exclusionary effect as "classical friendship" when practiced by those who claim to represent others through this display. A striking example is the now famous spectre of Osama Bin Laden, who has addressed the public on tape while among friends and devotees from his home or other protected site. The chilling power of these

messages lies in their presentation of his private identity as the emblematic representation of a virtuous friendship of the faithful that excludes nonbelievers as the enemy. It is not insignificant that these presentations, meant to be broadcast publicly, were made in his home or barracks, exclusive of any site where a public other may reside or be acknowledged. Through this private communication in public he has imposed an identity on the public that speaks to and acknowledges no one but himself and those who have become as himself. For Bin Laden—who remains hidden or dead as I write—this private life or identity expressed in public but not interacting with the public is the standard for public interaction in the closed society he advocates; on his terms, private life as public expression is the model for public rhetoric.

For public expression to function as public rhetoric requires a reconciliation of private identity with the ethical demand of relating to others. This movement cannot occur if we merely substitute private identity for public expression. And it cannot occur if we hold that our identity is defined and preserved through excluding rather than acknowledging others. In short, to transform private life as public expression into a public rhetoric is to transform private identity.

FROM PUBLIC EXPRESSION TO PUBLIC RHETORIC

It is important to elaborate at this point what is at stake in distinguishing public expression from public rhetoric, that is, in distinguishing a "private life made public" from the reconciliation of private life with the ethical demand of relating to others. I have already noted that the imposition of private life through public expression can only be accepted, rejected, or obliterated by the audience responding to such display. Such public expression of private life allows no opportunity for a shared understanding of identity developed through acknowledging or listening to others, a conversation that may result in the speaker reconsidering his or her identity in light of what is learned about others and vice versa.

One could argue that a reconsideration of identity is not needed—or desired—in a community of speakers who are already satisfied with their shared identity and interactions among their members. One can imagine, for instance, a small town, an industry, or an academic department where like minds have created tight friendships based on shared identity—places where presumably no one feels excluded. Public expression in these domains easily can be relegated to a mayor, executive, or

department head whose private desires, beliefs, and affiliations expressed in public are assumed to be—and, in fact, are—representative of the group. We can imagine, for instance, a mayor who speaks for everyone when he talks of the dangers of building a public housing unit that will attract jobless immigrants "not like us," an executive who strikes in her board of directors a single chord when she calls a family-leave plan "bad for business," or a department chair receiving nods of approval when he rejects a job candidate's scholarship as lacking the test of rigor as applied to himself and, of course, others already in the department. We can draw a picture here of an ideal social group in which conflict does not exist about the identity the group shares.

The problem with limiting public expression to such displays of singular identity, as these examples suggest, is not so much that the speech reflects the homogeneous identity of the speaker with the group as that it does not leave an opening for debate about that identity. And why is this important? It is important because private identity accepted as public without debate poses a threat to an open society and this in turn threatens pursuit of an ancient value that stands above identity, affiliation, and social politics—truth itself.

To forestall sidelining this argument by introducing a debate here as to whether "truth" is obtainable, let me say that I am referring to "truth" as it is most popularly conceived—as a commodity that a society values as a common pursuit, that is, knowledge that reveals individual or societal motives, desires, and needs publicly without deception. Karl Popper has elucidated most clearly the threat to public truth that exists by posing private identity or affiliation as public rhetoric in *The Spell of Plato*, volume one of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. To keep society open, capable of revealing public truth, he advocates competition among individual viewpoints and warns against identity politics, that is, the tendency for individuals to "accrue privileges by virtue of membership in a specific group, whether that be defined by race, creed, politics, or profession" (153). He further warns against the uncompromising viewpoints of radicals, who promote an aesthetic ideal at the expense of social systems and individual freedom through fanatical identification with an idea—such as fascism, communism, or white supremacy, for instance (see Popper 146–47).

Derrida, in his own fashion, has come to similar conclusions about identity and public expression. In *Politics of Friendship*, he argues that the

conditions for a democratic, open society could not be met in ancient society until the conception of friendship as a closed circle of persons who share an identity outside of which lies the enemy changed to include others not previously defined by that shared identity.

A democracy thrives by allowing an ever-widening public circle of possible friends to develop and prosper. A democracy requires the participation of persons who are not defined by the enemy that exists without, but rather by the anticipation of human connection of persons known and yet unknown, across societies, space, and time. A democracy ideally supports the reciprocal, equal participation of all in dialogue toward public truth, a circle of possible friends—as Derrida has put it—friends connected across the divide of space and time. We can think of all who form a democracy as connected to that possibility of a future friend who will answer the questions we cannot answer, uncover the public truths we seek but cannot yet find.

Modern political democracies, like ancient democracies composed of those who share a political bond, thrive in part on the virtue of friendship as classically defined, a shared identity, but they are also linked "to loving, to friendship as well as to love—more precisely, to the Greek, Jewish, and Christian history of this link, of the binding and unbinding of this link" (Derrida 79). Unlike classical friendship, which was based on a desire to maintain exclusivity, modern democratic friendship is based on a constant "binding and unbinding" of a link to others through love. The fraternization that typifies modern democracies is dependent both on the loving that overlooks—the ancient ideal of virtuous friendship that accepts affiliation with another, regardless of what that other does—and on the loving that looks for truth: in short, a love that hopes to find in another a better understanding of our own lives and purpose, one that leads to a better society. It is this latter act that requires a reconciliation of private identity with the possibility of having that identity challenged, changed, and expanded by virtue of contact with others in a public forum.

For the mayor, business executive, and department chair of my earlier examples, a reconciliation of private life or identity with the aim of democratic participation in an ever-expanding fraternity of possible friends could inspire a move from public expression to public rhetoric. Consider, for example, that our mayor could view the immigrants' presence in public housing as an opportunity to expand his own and his community's customs, languages, and beliefs; or the business executive

might interpret a family-leave policy as an opportunity to expand the talent pool of a workforce by bringing in more single parents and change—for the better—the relationships of employees to the company; or the department chair might regard a candidate's research as groundbreaking and innovative when it differs from the norm, as presented by the measure of his own work and that of his colleagues.

All of these rhetorical moves require the speaker to reconcile a previous conception of a private, closed identity—albeit shared—with the needs of an outside individual or group with whom they will build a relationship, a future, that will change them both in the common pursuit of a public good. This is the aim of public rhetoric, as I see it.

RECONCILING PRIVATE LIVES AND PUBLIC RHETORIC

In many ways, linking rhetoric with participation in an open, democratic society in pursuit of the public good underlies much of modern rhetorical theory. Note, for instance, Habermas's theory of communicative action, which links discourse interaction to moral sensitivity to the needs and perceptions of others; Burke's advocacy of the conversational parlor, an environment for continually renewed, healthy, and reciprocal exchange within an environment of safety; and, Rorty's model of building knowledge by "recontextualizing belief," that is, exposing oneself to as many new contexts and beliefs as possible and then contributing one's own view in reciprocal exchange (80). My coeditor and I also have linked rhetorical practice and reciprocal, democratic participation in our scholarship. Thomas Kent's theory of paralogic rhetoric defines textual meaning as the function of a dynamic interaction that involves charitable linguistic exchange (*Paralogic Rhetoric*). Taking this notion yet further, I have characterized meaningful rhetoric in public contexts as a phenomenological outcome of altruistic attention to others (Couture, *Phenomenological Rhetoric*).

In short, contemporary rhetorical theorists have fairly widely acknowledged that if rhetoric is to serve the public good, it must involve the reciprocal exchange of views in a charitable context. What is perhaps less widely acknowledged is the threat to such open exchange that is embedded in the increased opportunity to offer private life—whether individual or community—as a substitute for public rhetoric. Also rarely acknowledged is the threat to public rhetoric that lies in distinctly Western notions of how knowledge is created.

Although intrusions of private life in the public forum afforded by television and the Internet are relatively new developments, the justification for making public exposé of private life a substitute for public rhetoric is embedded deep in Western culture and continues to be strongly advocated in rhetorical theory today. I speak here of the literary and rhetorical tradition of the "strong poet." Those individuals who emulate this tradition are valued for the ways in which they distinguish themselves, separate themselves from others, in their private quest for truth, a quest that they can choose to make—or not to make—public. Furthermore, if the quest is made public, the strong poet who reveals his or her beliefs ideally remains resistant to critique, valuing original, individual expression over collaborative dialogue. Such is the generally admired behavior of the independent critic, for instance—the one who is better than, smarter than, richer than—and, perhaps, more holy than—others.

The rhetorical stance of the strong poet provides a significant challenge to modern theories of rhetoric that advocate democratic participation. To illustrate, Dianne Rothleder, in *The Work of Friendship,* tests Rorty's rhetorical ideal of "solidarity," for instance, against the demands of participatory democracy as practiced in the classrooms where we teach children how to play, work, learn, and communicate together. In these settings, she finds that Rorty's rhetorical project falls short. She concludes that participatory democracy requires a transformation of private life in the public forum, one that is in direct conflict with Rorty's rhetorical ideal of the strong poet. Because Rorty preserves the strong poet ideal by defining "solidarity as a public phenomenon that is kept far from private concerns," as Rothleder explains (xiv), he develops a negative vision of how private belief contributes to knowledge in a public rhetoric. For Rorty, individual genius—or the ability to create radically new knowledge—is not debated in the public forum; genius is always "other," outside of the familiar space that the public shares. Idiosyncratic difference and individual suffering also are circumscribed as private phenomena by Rorty and not discussed as public issues. As Rothleder tells us: "Solidarity, for Rorty, is based solely on each person's desire not to have his or her idiosyncracies judged in the court of reason" (44).

Instead of interpreting communal solidarity as the outcome of individuals communicating openly with one another, Rorty appears to define it as the result of a common desire not to be in pain or to cause

others pain. Consequently, he limits discussion about personal experiences that may illuminate difference to the private sphere. He advocates reading as a good way to experience private life as others do, lacking or even avoiding direct conversational acquaintance with them. For Rorty, Rothleder concludes, "Others and otherness are instrumental, experimental curiosities to be experienced and then used privately. Rortian self-creation is a negation of others, is anti-social, is friendless, and is indeed cruel" (52).

The desire to experience difference only in private shifts public responsibility for dealing with difference to the private sphere. Furthermore, because difference and suffering are dealt with in the private sphere where they are personally reflected upon and interpreted by the sole voice—that is, the strong poet—we relegate to the public sphere only those matters about which there can be no disagreement. According to Rothleder, Rorty assumes there is consensus about basic values in the public sphere and "makes what might be controversial seem entirely noncontroversial." "Who," Rothleder exclaims, "could comfortably argue against freedom?" (95). In American contexts, it is simply not a subject for debate.

Rothleder offers a new vision of public rhetoric, a rhetoric based in friendship that fosters reciprocal engagement in knowledge creation for the public good—the kind of rhetoric that Rorty presumably advocates, but that is hampered by the image and presence of the strong poet. Instead of asking students to emulate the ideal of the strong poet who retreats from society, Rothleder encourages them to develop "friendships of play," taking as her model the pedagogical practice and theory of educator Vivian Paley.

Friendships of play are safe havens where individuals can share their life stories without fear of retribution. However, the sharing of one's life story here does not result in conveying an obsessively pure, unchallenged, exclusive identity. Storytelling, she says in reference to Paley's classroom methods, must bridge the gap between private self-creation and public justice: "My self-creation needs to be just, and justice needs to give a turn to tell stories; I direct no cruelty to others and no one directs cruelty toward me" (138). Yet others are free to redescribe me and themselves in an experience that is shared, unlike Rorty's vision of self-narrative, which valorizes only the strong poet who is not the victim of others' redescriptions of themselves. (The irony, for Rothleder, is that

those who are doing the redescribing are the very strong poets whom Rorty admires.) By relegating these critics to the private sphere, they remain protected from others and are never forced to engage with them. Having to participate in the public sphere occasionally would keep them from becoming too self-centered, but in Rorty's vision, the public sphere is not destined to be the place where meaningful ideas are exchanged. Rothleder concludes: "The strong poet . . . is Rorty's regulative ideal for the private sphere. We cannot, any of us, realize this strength, but we are obligated to set up the world so that we can keep trying. And we preserve the public sphere insofar as it guarantees that we cannot withdraw completely into solipsism" (106).

In contrast to life as the strong poet, engagement in friendships of play, as Rothleder describes them, makes it possible for us to be changed by others through our interactions with them. She envisions rhetorical interactions within friendships of play as scenes where we can address private life in the public sphere without relapsing into solipsism on the one hand or destroying our individual integrity through vulnerable overexposure on the other. At the same time, within friendships of play mere public expression of private life is deemed an unacceptable imposition on others; what is expected is a speaker's transformed presentation of private life that anticipates and respects the stories of others already told and yet to come. Moreover, the creative mission of the strong poet is not abandoned within friendships of play. In contrast to emulating the artist who values only his or her own depiction of the world, within friendships of play our goal should be to become "a poet whose creations have room for parents, for the tradition, and for change" (Rothleder 141). Finally, Rothleder advises, we must both tell and listen within the friendships of play: "If we only read, we are limited by what has been written, and thus we must write and tell stories as well" (120).

Rothleder's appeal to transform the ancient and powerful value of friendship into a scene for public rhetoric that will lead to good rings true for me. The obligation to create the conditions for this kind of interchange lies within those who "play" in forums where public rhetoric dominates: in our classrooms, in community and corporate meeting rooms, in our Congress, and in the White House—all places where private lives need be reconciled with the ethical demand of public rhetoric to let everyone play.

I have outlined here just a few of the implications of relaxing and strengthening the contrasts and distinctions between private life and public rhetoric. This discussion began with some amusing examples of the imposition of private life on the public scene, but it must end with a reminder that horrific consequences of not reconciling private life with public rhetoric are daily present. In a recent *New York Times* editorial, Beena Sarwar speaks of the decision of a tribal council in a Pakistani village to have a young woman raped as revenge for a crime that her brother committed—a decree of Jirga law, which is "rooted in tribal customs and the power of elders," a power that the state chooses to ignore by calling these "private" matters. As Sarwar explains: "This often means, in practice, giving this small portion of the population private power over others, particularly women." The state's excuse for calling this a private matter is that this ceding of power leads to social stability—for all those who hold private power. Within very recent memory we have repeatedly heard our American president declare the private value of American freedom to be the justification for invading Iraq and uprooting Saddam Hussein. This private value, repeated as public rhetoric, is in effect assumed to be the voice of the people—a community of like minds and identity—and assumed to be a position unchallenged, not only by nations other than America, but also by those living in America. Yet, freedom demonstrably has not always had one value for all who live here. As W.E.B. DuBois poignantly remarked: "few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as the American Negro for two centuries" (7), two centuries when freedom was granted only to white Americans.

Much is at stake in saying that private lives, identities, and values remain out of the sphere of public rhetoric and, in contrast, in making a private value the standard for public rhetoric. It is a topic worth our study and a problem that should continue to hold our attention as teachers, scholars, and practitioners of public rhetoric.