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## Rhetorical Investments: Writing, Technology, and the Emerging Logics of the Public Sphere

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RHETORICAL INVESTMENTS: WRITING, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE EMERGING  
LOGICS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A Dissertation Presented

by

DANIEL EHRENFELD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2018

English

Composition and Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

RHETORICAL INVESTMENTS: WRITING, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE EMERGING

LOGICS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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This dissertation lays the groundwork for writing pedagogies that meaningfully engage students in the "writing public" (Yancey) of the 21st century. Through the development of an "infrastructural" model of the public sphere, I argue that rhetoricians and compositionists can correct an overreliance upon two archetypes of public engagement—the deliberative "conversation" and the embodied, activist "counterpublic"—that have failed to attune us to the distinct forms of relationality that characterize our changing public sphere. Drawing upon public sphere theory, ecological models of rhetorical circulation, and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, I develop a model of rhetorical investment that helps us better account for the ways that rhetors reinforce the spatiotemporal dynamics of the public sphere through their interactions with strangers.

As a means of testing and revising the infrastructural model of the public sphere that I have developed, I study two time periods noted for the emergence of new forms of relationality—the Progressive Era and the digital age. My first case study considers the public rhetoric of Emma Elizabeth Walker, a doctor whose

"social hygiene" lectures aimed to distribute contested knowledge about sex and bodies to a lay public of girls and young women in the early 1900s. By analyzing the mother-daughter chronotope that Walker deployed, I demonstrate that her lectures emerged from an ecological infrastructure born of conflicting "investments." My second case study examines public responses to the writing of Alexander Gray, whose viral #blacklivesmatter post was shared by nearly 50,000 strangers on the facebook platform. Analyzing Gray's engagement with the more than 3,500 comments written in response to this post, my study demonstrates that an individual rhetor can delimit the ways that public audiences imagine and enact their relations with one another, contributing to the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure that undergirds the public sphere.



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## CHAPTER I

### RECONSIDERING THE RELATIONAL DYNAMICS OF THE “PUBLIC TURN” IN COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

Because so much of public discourse today is enacted through the use of networked technologies, rhetoricians and compositionists have stressed the need for our students to reflect about—and to participate in—the modes of writing that characterize the digital landscape. As Kathleen Yancey said in her 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Chair’s Address,

We have a moment ... Never before has the proliferation of writings outside of the academy so counterpointed the compositions inside. Never before have the technologies of writing contributed so quickly to the creation of new genres. The consequences of these two factors is the creation of a writing public that, in development and linkage to technology, parallels the development of a reading public in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (298)

Failing to align our pedagogies with the practices of this “writing public” feels like a missed opportunity of historic proportions. But engaging our students in this digital landscape in authentic ways means rethinking the relationship between the classroom and the world beyond its walls. Traditionally, rhetorical education has prepared students to perform well in the “stock” situations that they are likely to encounter outside of the classroom. The nature of today’s communication landscape, however, is such that we can’t predict with very much confidence the kinds of rhetorical practices that will be relevant five years from now, let alone throughout the course of a lifetime. In other words, the speed with which rhetorical genres emerge and transform in digital spaces makes it difficult for us to equip

students with the “digital literacies” that will serve them throughout their writing lives.

I align myself with a different pedagogical approach. Instead of asking students to master a particular set of digital literacies, a number of rhetoricians and compositionists have encouraged them to analyze and practice digital rhetoric in its natural habitat—the public sphere. Immersing oneself in the public sphere, according to this approach, can be seen as its own kind of rhetorical education. If one wants to observe rhetoric *in situ*, there is no better means of doing so than by “lurking” in various online communities. Due to the fact that so much of digital discourse is enacted publicly, in real time, and archived indefinitely, it is relatively easy to bear witness to the rhetorical practices that characterize these communities. In addition to offering windows into varied worlds of discourse, the internet offers our students doors through which to enter into these worlds. Rhetoricians and compositionists have found that when students write in public forums—especially digital public forums—they demonstrate increased motivation (Zhang), more personal connection to course material (Tougaw), and greater audience awareness (Adsanatham, Garrett, and Matzke, Briggs, Clark).

Despite this interest in new modes of public writing, however, I argue that our pedagogies have ignored the most interesting aspect of the digital landscape—the extent to which ordinary rhetors participate in its transformation. Because the digital landscape is constantly changing, and because the dynamics of this landscape are shaped so profoundly by the rhetorical practices of users themselves, it offers students opportunities to reflect deeply about the ways that they participate in the

real-time transformations of the contexts within which they write. Never before, I argue, have student writers had the ability to so meaningfully contribute to the emergence and evolution of rhetorical genres.

Asking students to reflect about their own participation in the transformation of the digital landscape is a worthy goal. By reflecting about how they contribute to the emergence and evolution of rhetorical genres, students not only develop the ability to participate successfully in the public sphere. They also develop the ability to participate ethically in its transformation. In order to demonstrate the need for public writing pedagogies that encourage students to reflect about their own participation in the transformation of the digital landscape, I begin this chapter with a discussion of two concepts that inform my understanding of this digital landscape—*the public sphere* and *relationality*.

Then, through a survey of our field's public writing pedagogies, I argue that the limitations of these pedagogies can be traced to the inadequate models of relationality according to which we have conceptualized the public sphere. These models of relationality are important because they determine how writers imagine and enact their relations with one another, and hence how they conceptualize the roles that they play in transforming these relations. The first two models of relationality that I consider—the “conversation” model and the “counterpublicity” model—assume that the relational dynamics of the public sphere can be understood according to archetypes that transcend the contingencies of time and place. I demonstrate that these models limit our understanding of the evolving relational dynamics according to which strangers imagine and invoke shared worlds in digital

space. The third model of relationality that I consider—the “ecology” model—seems to overcome some of these problems by emphasizing the complexity, variability, and mutability of the contexts that rhetors inhabit. I demonstrate, however, that despite its emphasis on the radically contingent nature of the rhetorical situation, the “ecology” model yields pedagogies whose conceptions of relationality remain paradoxically static, obscuring the processes according to which rhetors shape complex material ecologies evolve over time.

Through this investigation of three models of relationality that inform our field’s “public turn,” I conclude that our pedagogies—whether focusing on digital or non-digital spaces—have reinforced static, ahistorical understandings of a public sphere whose dynamics are constantly changing. These pedagogies, as a result, have missed key opportunities to have students reflect about the ways that their own practices with varied genres and media technologies contribute to the transformation of the public spheres that they will encounter throughout their writing lives.

### **Relationality and the Public Sphere: The “Conversation” Model and the “Counterpublicity” Model**

For those seeking to understand the transformation of the digital public sphere, the body of scholarship known as public sphere theory provides a valuable theoretical framework. In the work of Jürgen Habermas, the term *bourgeois public sphere* refers to the invoked space of critical-rational deliberation that characterized Europe’s emerging bourgeois class of the eighteenth century. In the decades since Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, however,

the concept of the public sphere has been broadened to include a wide variety of public practices and material spaces. Throughout this dissertation, I hew closely to the definition of the public sphere articulated in the work of rhetoricians David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel. They define the public sphere as “a set of contested and complementary, affective and desire-laden imaginary social phenomenon brought into being through multiple acts of rhetorical poesis, addressed to strangers and occurring over time and in spaces that are simultaneously discursive, cultural, and material” (21).

According to Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel, the public sphere is not defined by adherence to a particular mode of deliberation. Nor is it defined by a particular form of social organization. Drawing upon the work of Michael Warner, they define the public sphere as a phenomenon that strangers call into existence through a collaborative rhetorical process. While Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel’s work helps us understand the nature of the social space that we call the public sphere, my interest in the public sphere’s transformation over time has led me to focus more explicitly on the ways that rhetors participate in transforming this social space. To study the public sphere, in other words, I believe that we need to do more than study the ways that strangers interact, deliberate, and take collective action in public spaces. We need to study the ways that strangers—using the discursive, cultural, and material means available to them—participate in the emergence of a particular kind of social space. Because the concept of the public sphere encompasses both the “local” work of writers and readers and the “global” structures of the communication landscape,

this concept helps us theorize the ways that individual acts of writing contribute to the emergence of new kinds of relationality.

Each year we are witness to new and surprising ways that writers and readers are learning to become relational with one another. In addition to noting that the digital public sphere has been the site of a proliferation of new genres, then, we might note that it has been the site of an unprecedented proliferation of new kinds of *relationality*. Thousands of social media users have changed their profile pictures to show solidarity with the victims of a terrorist attack. Apple has advertised the ability to share your heartbeat with a partner through the haptic vibrations of a wristwatch. A handful of hashtags has catalyzed the most significant racial justice movement in decades. *Relationality*, as I use the term throughout this dissertation, refers to *the ways that strangers become linked to one another, and enact these links, through discursive, cultural, and material practices*. Each time that a rhetor addresses an audience, whether in digital or non-digital contexts, she shapes the dynamics according to which humans “act together.” When we consider these relational dynamics in the aggregate—examining how countless numbers of strangers become linked to one another across time and space—we begin to see how this interplay of discursive, cultural, and material practices gives rise to a particular kind of social space: the public sphere.

Today, as I have argued, we have struggled to attune our students to the relational dynamics of the public sphere. Although our writing pedagogies have exposed students to memes, blogs, multimodal remixes, social media writing, and other “born digital” forms of rhetoric, they have not yet encouraged students to fully



consider—and to reshape, through their own public writing—the forms of deliberation and social action that are emerging around them. The root of the problem, I argue, is that most of our public writing pedagogies remain wedded to two static metaphors—or archetypes—of relationality: the deliberative "conversation" and the embodied, activist "counterpublic." While these archetypes have proven useful when considering traditional forms of deliberation, association, collective identity, and social action, this chapter demonstrates that our reliance upon them has reinforced limiting assumptions about the nature of relationality in digital spaces. Understanding the public sphere as a metaphorical "conversation" or an arena in which activist "counterpublics" struggle for visibility has reinforced the notion that the emerging relational dynamics of the digital public sphere necessarily echo those that have characterized the public sphere in earlier eras. By attempting to understand the digital public sphere's emerging phenomena through these archetypes, in other words, we have obscured the ways that material, technological, corporeal, and affective contingencies shape how interlocutors gather and interact.<sup>1</sup> And we have missed the opportunity to engage our students in reflection about the distinct relational dynamics according to which humans become public with one another through the use of emerging genres and media. We have tended to assume, in other words, that the digital public sphere is merely a re-mediated version of the embodied political activities that we typically associate with civic engagement (street protests and deliberative gatherings, for example). In truth, technologies of

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<sup>1</sup> Later in this chapter, I demonstrate this point through a discussion of the work of Patricia Roberts-Miller, Laura Ewing, Bryan Lutz, Lauri Goodling, Erin Dietel-McLaughlin, Abby Dubisar and Jason Palmeri, Matthew D. Barton, and Irene Ward.

all kinds—from the opinion forums of print newspapers to YouTube’s user interface to the pinging alert of a smartphone—shape the nature of our writing, habituating us to strangely mediated forms of human contact.

Twitter is a prime example. Exploring twitter’s ability to bring humans into new and unexpected relations with one another, Damien Pfister writes that 140-character tweets enact “continuous, real-time, constant contact” (131) similar to the “brief, seemingly inconsequential, communicative features that we often see in birds” (129). Pfister writes that while a tweet may be “low on information content,” it is often “high on sociability,” playing “a valuable attention-gathering function” and contributing to the creation of “a complex symphony that coordinates relationships” (129). On the occasion of twitter’s tenth birthday, Neil DeGrasse Tyson used a similar avian metaphor to comment about the surprising patterns of circulation and relationality that have emerged through its use. “Twitter,” Tyson wrote, “is evidence of our ability to flock. It is a spontaneous force of flocking of our species. Who would have even thought that was a thing that could happen?” (Rogers and Victor).

As these comments attest, the new and surprising relational dynamics of the digital public sphere often have little in common with the archetypes of “conversation” and “counterpublicity” through which we have conceptualized public writing. In order to develop pedagogies that encourage our students to reflect about how they participate in the transformation of these strange and varied relational dynamics—I argue that we need to set aside both “conversation” and “counterpublic” archetypes.

What we need instead is a model of the public sphere that doesn't conceive of relationality through reference to the static, ahistorical archetypes that have characterized so many of our public writing pedagogies. While Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel's work productively focuses our attention on the fact that the public sphere is an "imaginary social phenomenon," it doesn't fully theorize the kinds of relations that make up this phenomenon. In order to develop a model that attunes us to these relations, we must first examine how our current assumptions about relationality—and the public writing pedagogies that emerge from them—forestall an understanding of the ways that writers participate in the transformation of the digital public sphere. I begin by examining pedagogies based on the "conversation" model of relationality.

### **Public Writing and the "Conversation" Model of Relationality**

In 1996, Susan Wells proposed four ways that we might "go public" in the writing classroom. In contrast to the "letter to a nonexistent editor" (328) assignments that were common in composition classrooms at the time, "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want From Public Writing?" proposed that we base our writing pedagogies on the body of scholarship known as public sphere theory. Her article suggested four approaches to public writing pedagogy: 1) that our classrooms become public spheres, 2) that we encourage our students to analyze public discourse, 3) that our students write themselves into public forums, and 4) that we focus on the ways that students interface with the disciplines of the academy. In the two decades since Wells published this influential piece, her four propositions have served as the blueprint for a "public turn" in composition studies.

Though our field's public writing pedagogies have varied in approach, many of them have been characterized by a surprisingly consistent model of relationality. Becoming public, according to this model of relationality, depends upon one's ability to gain access to the kinds of spaces where public "conversations" occur and to develop the discursive practices and subjectivities needed to meaningfully participate in these conversations. Whether asking students to engage in public discourse beyond the walls of the classroom or asking them to transform the classroom community into a "protopublic" that simulates authentic forms of relationality, the goal of our public writing pedagogies has been to help students develop the skills and dispositions needed to participate in the "conversations" of the public sphere.

The archetype of a deliberative "conversation," however, has been an inadequate means of conceptualizing the relational dynamics that animate the digital public sphere. Despite the fact that we want our students to participate in a public sphere whose relational dynamics are radically different from those that have characterized the public sphere in earlier eras, we have continually conceptualized this public sphere through reference to the relational dynamics of an embodied, co-present conversation. In fact, public sphere theorist Michael Warner proposes that scholars abandon the "conversation" metaphor entirely, claiming that it has blinded us to processes of circulation and citation according to which writers and readers develop impersonal forms of "stranger relationality." As he writes

The usual way of imagining the interactive character of public discourse is through metaphors of conversation, answering, talking back. Argument and polemic, as manifestly dialogic genres, continue to have a privileged role in the self-understanding of publics. Indeed, it is remarkable how little work in

even the most sophisticated forms of theory has been able to disentangle public discourse from its self-understanding as conversation. (90)

Our field's public writing pedagogies demonstrate the same tendency. We have relied upon the "conversation" metaphor to such an extent that we struggle to disentangle it from the phenomena under study. Certainly, some public discourse does resemble a deliberative conversation. But when we have insisted on the primacy of the "conversation" metaphor, we have failed to attune ourselves to the highly mediated, asynchronous, often radically distributed forms of writing and reading that characterize the digital public sphere.

Take, for example, the writing that happens on social media. In 2014, the Pew Research Center released an analysis of twitter topic networks that identified six "conversational archetypes"—the polarized crowd, the tight crowd, brand clusters, community clusters, the broadcast network, and the support network. Though it features the conversation metaphor prominently, the report employs a number of other metaphors to convey the varied ways that digital writers congregate and disseminate information—"hubs," "influencers," "fragmented populations," "highly interconnected people," "bazaars with multiple centers of activity," "chatter ... relaying and passing along information," and "groupies" (Smith et al. 3)

As Ganaele Langlois and Greg Elmer write, these have suggested that networked communication exist because of a material infrastructure composed of "Web 2.0 companies, software processes, and informational architectures" that the field of political communication has traditionally ignored. "[T]hese elements," they write, "do not simply help transpose a public will online—they also transform public discussion and regulate the coming into being of a public by imposing specific

conditions, possibilities, and limitations of online use” (417). In sum, “The process is not simply one of human actors mobilizing communication technologies, but also one of communication technologies enabling new patterns of political organization” (420).

We begin to get a sense, through this analysis, of the emerging relational dynamics that characterize the digital public sphere. But by asking our students to see public discourse as a “conversation,” we have reinforced the notion that today’s public sphere is animated by the same relational dynamics that have characterized embodied, co-present deliberative arenas in earlier eras. In “Rediscovering the Back-and-Forthness of Rhetoric in the Age of YouTube,” for example, Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin call upon compositionists to teach students to “listen to public conversations” (W379) in order to become “critical, conscientious arguers in the publics they inhabit” (W394). From the comments sections of sites like YouTube, where students already engage in dialectical turn-taking, Jackson and Wallin suggest that compositionists extract “normative principles of argumentation” which will guide us as we shape a “rhetorically literate citizenry” (W391) capable of “critical listening and responding” (W385). Patricia Roberts-Miller makes a similar argument for conversation-based models of deliberation. She suggests that providing students with experiences of ideal back-and-forth argumentation in the classroom might “make them demand it in other places of the public” (223). Ultimately, Roberts-Miller and Jackson and Wallin conceive of the public sphere in similar ways—it is an arena that can be filled with (and shaped by) desirable or undesirable discursive practices. According to the pedagogies that they propose, the

transformation of the public sphere starts and ends with the transformation of the conversations that populate it.

As rhetoricians and compositionists, it seems only natural that we should place our hope in discursive practices. In doing so, we echo John Dewey, who asserted that better forms of deliberation might transform a public sphere that he lamented was “too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition ... with little to hold these different publics together in an integrated whole” (qtd. in Asen 175). This striving for wholeness through civic education, however, puts us at odds with others—from Hannah Arendt to Jürgen Habermas—who would balk at the idea that the discursive practices enacted in writing classrooms can alter the state of the public sphere in any significant way. According to Arendt, the decline of the public sphere is not evidence of the degeneration of our public “conversation,” but instead a symptom of the fact that society has lost the social and material contexts that support the possibility of true publicness. The world that people inhabit, Arendt claims, “has lost its power to gather them together” (53). Habermas, too, develops a model of the public sphere that emphasizes its extra-discursive foundation; in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he offers a richly textured analysis of the interrelated social, material, and economic factors that underlie its transformation.<sup>2</sup> Though Arendt and Habermas both demonstrate normative approaches to the study of the public sphere (each values a particular kind of

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<sup>2</sup> Interpreted through the lens of his later work, which focuses on discursive practices themselves, the book has often been misinterpreted as a call for a return to the deliberative norms of the eighteenth century. In actuality, however, most of Habermas’s text concerns itself with the ways that varied relational dynamics—and hence norms of deliberation—are rooted in complex historical transformations.

deliberative public over all others) their work productively focuses our attention on the varied ways that humans become relational with one another in particular times and places; for both Arendt and Habermas, social critique depends upon close examination of these relational dynamics. Hence, while the prescriptive approaches to civic education offered in the work of Roberts-Miller and Jackson and Wallin aim to link the activities of the classroom to the wider public arena, we might question whether their efforts to promote fixed norms of discursive interaction can encourage students to participate in the transformation of a public sphere that has always been an open-ended “ecology” composed of writers, readers, semiotic resources, environments, material objects, and media technologies, never just a particular kind of “conversation.”

Even when scholars in our field have taken a less prescriptive approach to deliberation, they have often reinforced the idea that our classrooms should foster the *dispositions* that support ideal forms of “conversation.” Elizabeth Ervin, David Fleming, and Jenny Rice are three scholars who base their pedagogies not on the teaching of ideal deliberation practices but instead on the creation of classroom contexts within which particular dispositions and habits are fostered. Ervin, quoting Robert D. Putnam, suggests that we might turn the classroom into a place where students feel like citizens, engaging in “dense networks of association” that give them a “‘taste’ for collective benefits” (394). For her, the goal of a protopublic pedagogy is to “actively accompany [students] in the transition from virtual-public discourse to real-public discourse, from class participation to civic participation” (389). Fleming similarly calls for classroom pedagogies that promote “good



*rhetorical* habits and dispositions” (52) and “commonplaces where people can literally come together to discuss and negotiate their differences” (16). Rice echoes this focus on public subjectivities. In order to foster a public sphere in which participants interact in productive ways, she argues, we must cultivate the “soil” of the public sphere. “If public talk is the soil,” she writes, “then public subjects are the fruit that grows from it” (21).

Pedagogies based on this “conversation” model evince a desire for broad societal change. S. Michael Halloran gave voice to this desire when he wrote, in 1982, that rhetorical education in American colleges during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries served to “maintain a standard of public discourse far superior to what we have in politics today” (109). I, too, believe that writing pedagogies should encourage students to imagine a better future for the public sphere. But I worry that the “conversation” model’s view of societal transformation depends upon an assumption that students can export particular practices, habits, and subjectivities—like seeds waiting to be planted—from the classroom into the wider world, remaking the public sphere in their own image. Pedagogies based on this view of societal transformation prepare students to foster, through their own public acts, *ideal* forms of democratic deliberation. Yet both protopublic tendencies—on the one hand, offering students particular practices that they might export into the public sphere, and on the other hand creating the conditions under which ideal public subjectivities might be cultivated within the classroom—imply that writing instructors should prepare their students to participate in a public sphere whose relational dynamics mimic those of a particular kind of “conversation.”

As I have argued, the “conversation” model of relationality has not been an adequate means of conceptualizing the dynamics of the “writing public” (Yancey) that has emerged in conjunction with the use of networked technologies. Because we have consistently mischaracterized the nature of the public sphere, using metaphors that reduce it to a conversation (either the kind of conversation that we lament or the kind of conversation that we want to create), we remain ill-prepared to meaningfully consider the varied practices, habits, and subjectivities that characterize the digital public sphere today. Though writing pedagogies that focus specifically on the digital public sphere are few and far between, our early experiments in digital public writing pedagogy have reinforced the same archetypes that have animated the broader public turn in rhetoric and composition studies. Later in this chapter, I survey these digital public writing pedagogies, considering the extent to which they reinforce archetypes of “conversation” and “counterpublicity.”

Before I examine these pedagogies, however, I turn my attention to a second model of relationality—the “counterpublicity” model. Through a survey of public writing pedagogies rooted in this counterpublicity model, I argue that we have tended to conceptualize the relations between multiple publics according to a fixed set of relational dynamics rooted in the history of embodied social movements. I argue, in addition, that this overreliance upon an archetype of counterpublicity has obscured the distinct dynamics that characterize the digital public sphere today, limiting our ability to engage students in reflection about these emerging dynamics.

## **Public Writing and the “Counterpublicity” Model of Relationality**

While Habermas’s concept of the public sphere is premised upon a belief that critical-rational deliberation can transform self-serving individuals into a public with a sense of its own collective interest, public sphere theorists such as Nancy Fraser, Jane Mansbridge, Seyla Benhabib, and Iris Marion Young have looked with skepticism upon the claim that a public “conversation” of this kind can legitimately synthesize the interests of those who remain marginalized along lines of race, class, and gender. These scholars suggest another approach: the counterpublicity model.

One of the key features of this counterpublicity model is its attention to the relationships between multiple publics. Fraser, for example, argues that we must not ignore the existence of “subaltern counterpublics,”<sup>3</sup> which she defines as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (67). Jane Mansbridge also theorizes how participants create discursive spaces in response to the exclusions that characterize the dominant public sphere. She argues for more attention to “enclaves” in which “those who have lost” (58) can regroup and make decisions about future battles. Seyla Benhabib, in a similar vein, writes that attending to the ways that marginalized groups deliberate in spaces beyond the public “conversation” requires us to pay closer attention to how these groups develop “new means and channels of communication to carry out their cultural and political struggles” (18). Though these theorists don’t reject the “conversation”

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<sup>3</sup> The term “counter-public” was coined by Rita Felski and later popularized by Nancy Fraser.

archetype (in many cases, they remain deeply invested in it), they have primarily conceived of relationality through a different archetype: the archetype of a “counterpublic.”

Compositionists and rhetoricians who draw upon this body of scholarship encourage students to circulate their writing in public, and in some cases to become engaged with local communities, institutions, and organizations through other forms of social action. These pedagogies suggest that the public sphere is a zone of struggle in which varied publics attempt to mobilize resources for the enactment of social change. Rather than aiming to improve the health of a singular public “conversation,” in other words, compositionists such as Paula Mathieu and Diana George, David Coogan and John Ackerman, Bruce Herzberg, Linda Shamoon and Eileen Medeiros, Nancy Welch, and Frank Farmer encourage students to enact collective goals by aligning themselves with—and shaping—the social struggles of already-existing “publics” and “counterpublics.”

I share with these scholars a commitment to engaging students in “the true grit and tumble of public life” (Coogan and Ackerman 12). But I am concerned about the ways that the counterpublic archetype has been generalized to theorize collective political practices of all kinds. While an archetype of embodied, activist counterpublicity might help us accurately describe the relational dynamics of a movement such as ACT UP or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, publics of this kind are today the exception, not the rule. In today’s communication landscape, as Manuel Castells points out, social movements “spread by contagion in a world networked by the wireless Internet and marked by fast, viral diffusion of images”

(2). Nancy K. Baym and danah boyd argue that “[N]etworked publics have affordances that differentiate them from other types of publics—including persistence, replicability, searchability, and scalability—that collectively introduce new social dynamics requiring people to manage invisible audiences, collapsed context, and a blurring between the public and private” (326). These new social dynamics take unexpected forms. For example, Janaya Khan, a co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, has suggested that we might model our political movements on the practices of empire penguins, who move in a spiral pattern to share privileged positions of warmth and safety within their colony. In so doing, we might decolonize our racial hierarchies.fo

As this brief discussion illustrates, the ground upon which politics is enacted is a constantly shifting terrain. But because the “counterpublicity” model reinforces the idea that all social movements are characterized by a fixed set of relational dynamics, it has yielded pedagogies that fail to attune students to the strange new forms of gathering and mobilization that characterize the digital public sphere. In other words, assuming that we can account for digital age social movements through an archetype of counterpublicity is a mistake. Counterpublics, as they have been theorized by Fraser, Mansbridge, and others, are distinctly *embodied* social formations that attempt to achieve visibility in material spaces. Counterpublics emerge when strangers come together in semi-private “enclave” spaces, later making themselves visible to the wider public through acts of embodied solidarity. In short, the concept of a “counterpublic” lends itself to the study of embodied social movements. But it doesn’t, in its current form, help us accurately describe a “space”

like reddit or 4chan, both of which are composed of insular communities that are simultaneously very public—the writing that takes place on these sites is accessible to anyone who would like to view it, now and for the foreseeable future. In addition, social media discourse depends upon networks of friends and followers that cut across existing distinctions between public spaces and private spaces. We no longer associate with strangers in the ways that our activist forebears did. And our models of relationality should recognize this. When strangers circulate and re-circulate a viral meme, sending it rippling through networks that cut across personal, familial, professional, and public contexts, it becomes clear that today’s practices of consciousness-raising will never resemble those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the feminist movement provided the model for Fraser’s concept of the counterpublic. While the digital public sphere certainly has its own “enclave” and “public” spaces, it also has spaces in which strangers associate, become visible, and take action in new ways. The “counterpublicity” model, in other words, overgeneralizes the relational dynamics of a particular moment in social movement history—a moment when marginalized people engaged in politics by first turning inward toward one another—in semi-private “enclave” spaces—and later turning “outward” toward the wider public by making their bodies visible in the streets.

By conceptualizing social activism through this “counterpublicity” archetype, public writing pedagogies have reinforced an overly static understanding of relationality that hasn’t enabled students to reflect meaningfully about the ways that they might enact (and imagine) new kinds of relations with strangers in the digital public sphere. Nancy Fraser’s work, with its emphasis on the ways that

subaltern counterpublics coalesce and achieve visibility in the wider public sphere, provides inspiration for many of these pedagogies. Frank Farmer, for example, asks his students to participate in the ongoing struggles of subaltern counterpublics whose members turn inward—toward one another—in order to “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 67), but also speak outward to wider publics through “agitational activities” (Fraser 68). Through an examination of DIY zine culture, Farmer demonstrates that student writing can serve not only to persuade strangers but also to motivate them to write, as fellow counterpublic members. In “Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World,” Nancy Welch articulates a similar understanding of public writing, asserting that becoming public depends not only upon one’s ability to deliberate with strangers but also upon establishing “the ability of a whole class of people to stand up as public selves at all” (96). Welch makes struggles for collective agency central to the writing pedagogy that she advocates.

Service learning pedagogies have also been informed by this “counterpublicity” model of relationality. Rather than advocating for a particular mode of deliberation or encouraging students to persuade readers, these pedagogies have emphasized the importance of using writing to effect change in local communities. As Shamoan and Medeiros write, “Public writing starts with a heightened sensibility that something is awry within the community and that each of us as members of that community have a responsibility and a right to seek a remedy through political engagement” (179). According to service learning pedagogies rooted in the “counterpublicity” model, writers play an important role in

directing attention and resources toward issues that matter, speaking to wider audiences about these issues in order to promote the formation of counterpublics that fight for them in the public sphere. For Mathieu and George, for example, successful political engagement depends upon a student's ability to develop "networks of collaboration and community action" (145) that aid them in "fostering conversation, creating pressure, and even creating unexpected allies" (144). Pedagogies of this kind value public writing's ability to "broaden the amount of public discourse about an issue" (Shamoon and Medeiros 189), "keep alive important public, human concerns" (Mathieu and George 133), and "draw a wide variety of people into concern for the issue" (Shamoon and Medeiros 189). As Bruce Herzberg writes, service learning pedagogies operate according to a belief that "publics can be addressed if we are truly willing to engage them" (403). Civic engagement is possible, in other words, when students "[w]rite their way into the publics they seek to join" (George and Mathieu 259).

While these pedagogies do encourage students to participate authentically in the "true grit and tumble of public life" (Coogan and Ackerman 12), my concern is that they reify a particular kind of activism while obscuring other possibilities for raising consciousness, fostering communities, and taking collective action. Instead of focusing our attention on emerging activist practices, in other words, the "counterpublicity" model of relationality has reinforced a static understanding of the public sphere as a zone of co-existing "cultures" of deliberation. Rhetorician Gerard Hauser is one scholar who has articulated a model of the public sphere based on the idea of multiplicity and cultural diversity; he proposes a "reticulate public



sphere” made up of a “manifold of conversations,” each operating according to “standards of reasonableness reflected in the vernacular language of conversational communication” (56). Each public is its own culture, so to speak. In a similar vein, Iris Marion Young argues that the public sphere is not a single arena in which participants interact according to universal norms; instead, relationality always depends upon “the cultural specificity of deliberation” (123). For composition instructors such as Phyllis Mentzell Ryder, encouraging students to reflect about the ideological dimension of deliberation is an important means of preparing them for the transition from the classroom to the wider public sphere. Her pedagogy advocates exposing students to “the range of counter-rhetorics available in America” while encouraging them to analyze how privileged groups dismiss arguments that threaten dominant discourse norms of individualism and civility. Christy Friend, a compositionist who builds upon Young’s work, proposes a public writing pedagogy that encourages students to support the disenfranchised, recognize the particularity of group interests, and value “the multiple shapes that public deliberation can take” (673). In essence, she proposes a tolerant model of relationality that highlights how struggles for social justice depend upon awareness of—and validation of—varied “cultures” of deliberation. William Burns and Christian Weisser each propose pedagogies that ask students to research issues of public controversy in order to reveal the material, discursive, historical, social, and political factors that have shaped varied deliberation practices. After analyzing these controversies, Weisser reports, most of his students are able to “[find] distinct counterpublics in which to write” (114).

While we can't deny that rhetorical practices are often rooted in particular "cultures" of deliberation and counterpublicity, I want to suggest that our overreliance upon archetypes that originate in 20<sup>th</sup> century social movement politics has hindered our ability to recognize the surprising ways that digital publics cut across existing social and spatial borders, reproducing and extending themselves in ways distinct from embodied counterpublics. The forms of relationality that characterize the digital public sphere depend less upon embodied social movement dynamics of "turning inward" (toward fellow members of a counterpublic) and "turning outward" (toward the wider public) and more upon digital-born patterns of "swarming" and "virality." New forms of visibility and allyship encourage us to reexamine what it means to lend support to a cause. And strangers in the digital public sphere don't always coalesce into "communities" and "publics," at least not in the ways that we usually define these terms. As Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess write in their study of twitter hashtags, the simultaneous performance and dissemination of a hashtag brings into being "ad hoc issue publics" (2) that "form, engage, and (potentially) dissolve again" (8) at great speed.

In sum, networked patterns of circulation and uptake challenge our assumptions about the politics of public association, and will continue to do so. The question, now, is how our models of relationality will help us make sense of this emerging public sphere.

## **Digital Public Writing Pedagogies and the Legacy of the “Conversation” and “Counterpublicity” Models**

As I have argued, the limitations of both the “conversation” model and the “counterpublicity” model become especially apparent when we turn our attention to the digital public sphere, whose relational dynamics exceed the archetypes according to which we have conceptualized public writing. Despite the inadequacies of these models, however, they persist. As I demonstrate in this section, the archetypes of “conversation” and “counterpublicity” that have animated our public writing pedagogies have also informed our early experiments in digital public writing pedagogy.

Though digital public writing pedagogies have touted the benefits of using technologies and technological infrastructures to engage in public writing, they haven’t encouraged students to reflect about the extent to which these technologies have contributed to the emergence of new forms of relationality. These pedagogies have, instead, assumed that media technologies do little more than play an enabling role—they help students deliver their voices more quickly, more loudly, with greater ease, and across greater distances. In short, digital public writing pedagogies have encouraged students to use digital technologies to engage in the “conversations” and “counterpublics” that they encounter in the public sphere, not to establish new kinds of relationality. Digital public writing pedagogies, for example, have suggested that networked communication enables students to be “part of an ongoing conversation” (Ewing 559), to “contribute to both local and global conversations” (Lutz), and to “to have their voices heard in a way that really

matters” (Goodling). According to models of relationality based on these archetypes, becoming public depends upon one’s ability to become co-present with others in a public arena—either literally or metaphorically—and to participate in typified forms of relationality in these arenas. What is striking about this body of scholarship, however, is not its occasional use of metaphors of “conversation” or “counterpublicity.” As Warner writes, it is incredibly difficult to talk about public discourse without relying upon notions of communication that originate in the embodied, co-present contexts of face-to-face interaction. What I find striking about this body of scholarship is its lack of any other means of making sense of the complex terrain of the digital public sphere, which is not only a “conversation” or a venue for “counterpublicity” but also a complex material ecology composed of data centers, fiber-optic cables, pay-per-click banner ads, usernames, mobile devices, designed interfaces, and algorithms. These elements of the digital landscape have profound effects upon the relational dynamics that animate the public sphere today.

Too often, however, we have ignored these relational dynamics and instead focused our attention on new and emerging digital practices. For example, we have called for pedagogies that “expand our notions of civic engagement” by attending to new discursive practices (Goodling). For Erin Dietel-McLaughlin, these new discursive practices include irreverent (or parodic) composition, which she describes as “a privileged mode of argumentation in digital venues”; incorporating this mode of argumentation into our pedagogies, she claims, might ensure that students are “better prepared to identify and critique discourses of power and resistance and to compose new forms of democratic engagement in offline and

online arenas” (19). For Abby Dubisar and Jason Palmeri, political video remix is “an important way for citizens to participate in civic discourse” and “a fruitful way of engaging students in practicing political rhetoric” (89). These pedagogies have helpfully focused on new discursive tools with which writers can engage in “conversations” and “counterpublics.” At the same time, I believe that they haven’t paid enough attention to the emerging dynamics according to which strangers gather and interact in the digital public sphere. By focusing primarily on *practices* of digital discourse, Dubisar and Palmeri deemphasize the ways that political video remix has transformed the *relations* between people.

In other words, we have recognized the emergence of new rhetorical practices, but we have remained wedded to static, typified conceptions of the social contexts within which these practices are enacted. To investigate how video remix has transformed the communication landscape, catalyzing a change in the nature of the entire ecology, would mean considering the ways that communities read, write, and share these remixes. It would mean considering the ways that strangers establish particular kinds of bonds and collective identities through practices of appropriation and remix. In short, it would mean focusing our attention on the ways that practices of political remix create the conditions for future interactions—how these practices shape the interrelations between strangers, and ultimately how they contribute to the transformation of the public sphere as a whole.

Media technologies play a constitutive role in this transformation. Habermas’s study of the coffeehouses and salons of eighteenth century Europe suggests that physical co-presence in concrete spaces catalyzed the emergence of a

public “conversation” that was historically unique. Speech was the medium. But his work also demonstrates that this “conversation” was constituted in part through the situated technological practices of the print revolution, which enabled far-flung citizens to imagine one another as potential interlocutors, participating in radically new relational dynamics through the production, circulation, and uptake of printed texts.

When we continue to conceptualize the public sphere according to archetypes that we inherit from earlier eras, we fail to heed the lesson that Habermas’s work teaches us—namely, that our practices with media technologies contribute to the transformation of the public sphere. Early work in digital public composition, for example, attempted to consider whether internet spaces meet the criteria for critical-rational deliberation that Habermas enumerated in his study of the coffeehouses and salons of eighteenth century Europe. In an early piece about composing in the digital public sphere, for example, Matthew D. Barton assessed the extent to which blogs, online discussion boards, and wikis align with Habermas's ideals of equality, openness, autonomy, and participation. "If blogs may be the equivalent of the diaries and letters that played such a critical role in the development of the old bourgeois public sphere," Barton writes, "then perhaps online bulletin boards are the cyber equivalent of the eighteenth century salons, table societies, and coffee shops that first saw the application of rational-critical debate to political and economic issues" (185). In “Parody Blogging and the Call of the Real,” Roberts-Miller similarly wrote that Usenet newsgroups are “Habermas’s critical-rational public sphere of, in Usenet jargon, ‘argument geeks.’” In a similar

vein, Irene Ward questioned whether the “sound-byte technology” of the internet lends itself to the extended, back-and-forth dialogism necessary for public deliberation (376), but held out hope that networked communication might “function in ways that print media functioned in the eighteenth century by delivering information, points of view, and extended argument to a growing sector of the public” (375).

Responding to optimistic predictions about the rebirth of the public sphere in the digital age, these scholars have raised important questions about whether technology alone can catalyze the return of critical-rational deliberation. Yet by measuring emerging digital phenomena against a yardstick created by Habermas, whose model of the public sphere remains rooted in the deliberative arenas of the eighteenth century, we reinforce a normative understanding of relationality that leaves little room to theorize the emergence of a new kind of public sphere. By asking, in other words, whether discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and newsgroups might successfully approximate the network of salons, coffeehouses, and print cultures that we encounter in the work of Habermas, we have valued a very particular ideal of the public sphere’s “health”—we have assumed that a healthy digital public sphere operates according to relational dynamics that transcend the historical contingencies that shaped Europe in the eighteenth century. We have wondered, in other words, whether digital networks can serve as venues for particular kinds of “conversations” and “counterpublics.”

And while the public sphere often *does* resemble a conversation or an arena in which varied counterpublics vie for visibility, I want to suggest that our

overreliance upon these archetypes has led to the development of public writing pedagogies that have not asked students to consider how digital publics emerge and dissipate, reproducing and extending themselves in ways distinct from embodied, co-present social formations. As a result, these pedagogies have not asked students to consider how writers interface with the evolving relational dynamics that constitute the public sphere in particular times and places.

In order to attune ourselves to these dynamics, I argue that we need to recognize that both the “conversation” model and the “counterpublicity” model reduce the public sphere. They attempt to conceptualize a single way that the public sphere works across time and space, without regard for the contingencies of history and situation. To attune our students to the changing nature of the public sphere, I believe that we must conceive of it as a historically-distinct social phenomena. It is, in other words, open to change and rearticulation. Though we can never completely do away with archetypes, we can benefit from situating them within a complex and fluid ecology.

### **Relationality and the Public Sphere: The “Ecology” Model**

In this section, I consider the extent to which an “ecology” model might offer a broader, more flexible understanding of relationality that helps us transcend the static, ahistorical archetypes that have characterized our public writing pedagogies. Conceptualizing the public sphere according to an “ecology” model, I argue, helps us see it not only as a “conversation” or an arena in which varied publics and counterpublics struggle for visibility but also as a “web of life” (Gries, “Agential



Matters” 88) that is continually spun and re-spun, in part through the public acts of rhetors..

Because the “ecology” model of relationality is well suited to the study of our rapidly changing digital public sphere, I argue that it lays the groundwork for writing pedagogies that encourage students to reflect about—and to participate in shaping—forms of association, deliberation, and social action that exceed the current political imagination of our public turn. My analysis of public writing pedagogies rooted in the “ecology” model, however, reveals a number of limitations that must be addressed before this model can help us attune student writers to the roles that they play in the transformation of the digital public sphere.

According to the “ecology” model, a complex system—whether it be an insect swarm, a social network, a street protest, or an academic discipline—follows the logic of “a web, in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole” (Cooper 370). In other words, the metaphor of an “ecology”—and resonant metaphors such as “network,” “system,” and “web”—implies radical interdependence. Drawing upon work in complexity theory, network theory, and systems theory, the “ecology” model focuses our attention not on the practices of individual rhetors but instead on the emergent properties of crowds, networks, and flows. As Margaret Syverson writes, quoting Mitchell Waldrop, a complex ecology is constituted through “myriad individual acts ... without anyone being in charge or consciously planning it” (3). Borrowing a metaphor from Mark C. Taylor, Byron Hawk asserts that writers are—like ants—“a ‘colony of writers’ caught up in the larger evolutionary flows of other networks” (*A Counter-History*

194). Rather than assuming, in other words, that the public sphere operates according to the typified relational dynamics that characterize deliberative “conversations” and activist “counterpublics,” the ecology model suggests that our relations with one another are fundamentally indeterminate—these relations are constantly re-articulated and re-configured within the flux of a material ecology. As Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder writes, such a view encourages us to understand agency not as the property of an individual but instead as a phenomenon emerging from “complex constellations of humans and nonhumans” (116).

Because the “ecology” model highlights the complex and emergent dynamics of the material world, it would seem to offer a needed corrective to the static, ahistorical models of relationality that have undergirded so many of our public writing pedagogies. In fact, while the “ecology” model pre-dates the rise of networked technology, it focuses our attention on the distributed, decentralized dynamics of crowds in ways that seem particularly useful for studying the digital public sphere, which is an ecology composed of hardware, software, code, bodies, texts, discourses, and social formations that structure strangers’ relations to one another.

When we turn our attention to the work of rhetoricians and compositionists who have applied an “ecological” lens to the topic of public writing pedagogy, however, it becomes clear that the “ecology” model has estranged us from the core concern of public sphere theory—namely, a concern about the inherently political ways that strangers assemble and enact their relations with one another amidst changing social and material conditions. Pedagogies rooted in the “ecology” model,

in other words, don't engage student writers in reflection about their own participation in the historical transformation of the public sphere. As a result, the "ecology" model misses much of what the "conversation" model and the "counterpublicity" model strive to offer our pedagogies—a deep investment in projects of civic engagement and social change.

The work of Jenny Edbauer (now Jenny Rice) illustrates the ecology model's tendency to de-historicize the transformation of the public sphere. Her pedagogy of "generative research," for example, asks students to contribute to the concatenation of public texts across time and space. As an example of the kind of work that she values, Edbauer points to a blogger who "document[s] local places without any other *teleos* beyond the documentation itself" [22]). While this pedagogy productively highlights the indeterminate nature of writing in public, I believe that its focus on purposeless concatenation discourages rhetors from bringing their own goals and ideals to the public sphere. By advocating this explicitly anti-teleological approach to public writing, in other words, Edbauer discourages reflection about how we transform the ecologies that we inhabit through willed acts of writing.

Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber adapt Edbauer's concept of rhetorical ecologies to the "protopublic" space of the writing classroom. In contrast to Edbauer, however, Rivers and Weber ask their students to be goal-oriented about their writing—their pedagogy encourages students to write a set of texts that could be circulated as a means of catalyzing "a specific institutional change they want to see implemented" (203). Rivers and Weber's focus on the interplay between multiple texts and audiences moves us beyond the static models of relationality that

have characterized many of our public writing pedagogies. But their pragmatic approach deemphasizes the extent to which rhetorical acts shape not only specific policies but also the dynamics of the public sphere itself. When we write in public, in other words, we don't just fight for a \$15 minimum wage or a special investigation into police misconduct. We also fight for particular forms of *relationality*. When we act rhetorically, we leave behind legacies. We delimit the ways that others can become rhetorical in our wake. To understand these legacies, we need to ask not only how our rhetorical acts shape our relations with particular audiences but also how these acts shape the nature of the wider public sphere. In doing so, we might connect our pedagogies to the rich field of public sphere theory, which has been concerned less about the ways that individuals can further particular causes and more about the state of the public sphere itself. Rivers and Weber's narrow focus on institutional change leads them to ignore these broader concerns about the transformation of the public sphere.

The ecological pedagogy proposed by Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel exhibits the same limitation. While recognizing that agency is "distributed across a fragile and complex dance among multiple and ontologically disparate actors" (107), they propose a pedagogy that doesn't ask students to participate reflectively in the evolution of this complex dance. According to the pedagogy that they propose, students should "make educated guesses about what modes, media, and genres would best articulate with a particular audience and exigency" (115). In short, they encourage their students to make decisions about how to get things done with

particular audiences, not how to shape the relational dynamics of the ecologies that they inhabit.

Nathaniel Rivers, in a more recent piece titled “Ecologies of Race in the Public Rhetoric Classroom,” recounts a class in which he asked students to consider the discourses that circulated after the death of Michael Brown, whose killing at the hands of Ferguson, Missouri police sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. In his classroom, Rivers compiles an evolving list of texts to help students see that race cannot be understood as a single “conversation” but must instead be seen as “an ecology of discourses shaping and responding to one another” (5). Though the pedagogy that he implements in his classroom may encourage students to think more ecologically about the circulation of discourse, Rivers seems unconcerned about the particularities of the ecology that he asks his students to investigate. We know that this ecology is complex. But we don’t know very much about the power relations that animate it, the channels of circulation that constitute it, the ways that people are positioned within it, or how its relational dynamics are evolving. There is something deeply apolitical about this approach.

Brian Gogan takes this apolitical tendency to its logical conclusion. Asking students to list more than a hundred “people, histories, objects, interests, and texts” that are directly and indirectly connected to the topics of their own texts, Gogan encourages them to see that “their very participation in the ecology pushes and pulls at the web in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that have consequences” (51). Like other “ecological” pedagogies focused on public writing, however, Gogan’s pedagogy doesn’t encourage students to articulate particular goals about the ways that they

want to push and pull at the webs within which they write. As a result, the pedagogy that he proposes misses an important opportunity to have students reflect about how they participate in the transformations of the ecologies that they inhabit, shaping these ecologies in ways that delimit how strangers imagine and enact their relations with one another.

As this discussion has begun to illustrate, terms such as “ecology,” “network,” and “system” too often function as universalizing metaphors, offering students little opportunity to consider how public acts of rhetoric might alter the relational dynamics of these complex systems. Even though it aims to attune us to the mutability and unpredictability of the contexts within which rhetoric circulates, the “ecology” model—in its current form, at least—doesn’t help us engage our students in reflection about the transformation of the public sphere. Ironically, it offers us a vision of the public sphere that is nearly as static and ahistorical as those offered by the “conversation” model and the “counterpublicity” model.

In the following chapter, I develop an “infrastructural” model of relationality that more meaningfully engages students with the political questions at the heart of public sphere theory. To do so, I explore the current limitations of the “ecology” model in more depth, investigating the reasons why this model has been unable to attune students to the changing relational dynamics of the digital public sphere. By revising the “ecology” model, I seek to lay the groundwork for pedagogies that engage student writers in reflection about how they participate in the transformation of the public sphere. A primary goal of these pedagogies would be to encourage reflection about the consequential nature of our rhetorical acts. How do

our rhetorical acts shape the ways that strangers deliberate, associate, become collective with one another, and take action?

Developing such a model, I argue, might enable us to transcend the archetypes that have hindered our public writing pedagogies. But it might also help us remember that the public sphere is not merely an unpredictable flux, as the ecology model has tended to suggest. Developing such a model might help us recognize, in other words, that the public sphere is an ecology whose transformations are profoundly consequential, and that these transformations—as profoundly consequential as they are—are catalyzed in part through the acts of ordinary rhetors.

## CHAPTER II

### DEVELOPING AN INFRASTRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In a world in which networked communication practices have transformed the ways that writers and readers become relational with one another, the ability to adapt to an evolving public sphere is more important than ever. Despite our field's interest in new modes of public writing, however, rhetoricians and compositionists have largely ignored the digital public sphere's unique pedagogical value—the fact that it offers ordinary rhetors opportunities to reflect deeply about the real-time transformations of the contexts within which they write. Basing our public writing pedagogies on static, ahistorical understandings of the public sphere, we have failed to engage students in reflection about how their own practices with varied genres and media technologies contribute to the transformation of the public spheres that they will encounter throughout their writing lives. As a result, we have missed an opportunity to encourage student writers to pursue political commitments to the transformation of the public sphere.

The most promising of our current models—the “ecology” model—can help students recognize the complexity, variability, and mutability of the public sphere in ways that other models have not. But “ecology” pedagogies have proven inadequate to the task of helping students reflect about the inherently political ways that they participate, through everyday acts of rhetoric, in the transformation of the digital public sphere. To develop a model that attunes students to the roles that they play in



the transformation of the digital landscape, we need to turn toward the very body of work that inspired our “public turn” in the first place—the legacy of public sphere theory that we inherit from Habermas and his critics. To develop public writing pedagogies that help us focus on the transformation of the communication landscape, in other words, I seek to develop a model rooted in both the theoretical concerns of public sphere theory and the complex dynamics of the ecology model. Such a model might help us understand the public sphere as a site of constant change, but would not obscure the hegemonic character of the forms that animate it in particular historical moments (forms such as “liberal individualism” and “ethnic solidarity,” for example, are always rooted in the particularities of the eras in which they are established and reinforced). Such a model would help us understand the public sphere as a complex material system, but would also help us consider the ways that this system is shaped by very human investments in the social imaginaries that structure our relations with one another. And such a model would help us understand the public sphere as a “posthuman” phenomenon while at the same time helping us recognize the role that willed rhetorical acts play in its transformation. In sum, I propose a model of the public sphere that attunes us to

- 1) the historical nature of the public sphere
- 2) the paradoxically material and “imagined” nature of the public sphere
- 3) the ways that individual rhetors invest in the dynamics of the public sphere

In this chapter, I work to develop such a model. In doing so, I strive to find a middle ground between public sphere theory and ecological theory that avoids the pitfalls

of both—a model of the public sphere that is ecological but also historical, real but also imagined, and posthuman but also profoundly human. I call this an *infrastructural* model of the public sphere, a term that captures both the durability of the ecologies that we inhabit as well as the always-unfinished nature of their construction. In order to better consider the ways that rhetors—enmeshed within an ecological infrastructure—invest in the relational dynamics of this infrastructure, I draw upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the *chronotope*. Next, I apply this infrastructural model to a case study discussed by Jenny Edbauer in her 2005 piece “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies.” Through my re-reading of the “Keep Austin Weird” phenomenon discussed by Edbauer, I consider the extent to which my infrastructural model of the public sphere highlights the role that rhetors play in the transformation of the complex ecologies within which they are enmeshed.

### **The Ecology Model: Lacking a Historical Perspective**

In order to understand the roles that we play, as rhetors, in the transformation of the public sphere, we need to attune ourselves to its historical nature. That is, we need to recognize that the public sphere takes particular forms in particular historical moments. And we need to recognize that our own rhetorical acts are deeply implicated in the construction of these historical moments. I contend that it is only by using a historical lens to understand the public sphere that we can accurately reflect about the ways that we reinforce, subvert, and reinvent its dynamics, contributing to its never-ending transformation. In other words, a historical perspective enables rhetors to reflect about the contingency and

consequentiality of their own rhetorical practices, laying the groundwork for ethical choices about these practices.

As I have argued, however, our public writing pedagogies—whether focusing on digital or non-digital spaces—have been informed by models of relationality that reinforce notably *ahistorical* understandings of the public sphere. While these pedagogies have encouraged students to make themselves heard in public, they have not yet asked students to see their own public acts as historically consequential acts. To help rhetors understand the profoundly historical nature of their own rhetorical acts, and hence to enable them to make more reflective choices about how they participate in a public sphere that is constantly transforming, I contend that we should develop a model of the public sphere that combines elements of ecological scholarship and public sphere theory. This combined approach would help balance the shortcomings of these complementary theories. Highlighting the unpredictable nature of the contexts within which we write, the “ecology” model has usefully emphasized the *fluid* and *emergent* dynamics of the rhetorical situation. As Marilyn Cooper writes, “An important characteristic of ecological systems is that they are inherently dynamic; though their structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly changing, limited only by parameters that are themselves subject to change over longer spans of time” (369). In a similar vein, Margaret Syverson argues that complex systems are “adaptive, self-organizing, and dynamic” (183). Quoting John Holland, Syverson writes that when we attempt to understand the fluctuating dynamics of the ecologies that we inhabit, “standard theories in physics, economics,

and elsewhere [...] are of little help because they concentrate on optimal end points, whereas complex adaptive systems ‘never get there.’ They continue to evolve, and they steadily exhibit new forms of emergent behavior” (5-6).

This emphasis on indeterminate outcomes and endless flux suggests productive ways to theorize the transformation of the public sphere. In particular, the ecology model helps us see the public sphere as an emergent phenomenon whose complexity exceeds the archetypes of “conversation” and “counterpublicity” that have delimited our understanding of publicness. As Edbauer writes, an ecological perspective encourages us to see rhetoric as “a process of distributed emergence” (13). While this ecology model has provided us with a framework for theorizing the fluid and emergent nature of writing and its contexts, however, I argue that we need to augment it with a *historical* perspective. A historical perspective might help us situate the public spheres that we inhabit in their historical contexts, attuning us to the distinct relational dynamics that animate complex ecologies in particular times and places. Without a model of relationality that enables us to consider the distinct dynamics that animate the public sphere in particular times and places, we lack the means to reflect about how our own acts might contribute to the reinforcement of new forms of solidarity, new forms of intimacy, new forms of collective action, new forms of identification—in short, new forms of relationality. What a historical perspective provides rhetors, in other

words, is the means to theorize a politics of practicing rhetoric in a public sphere that is always evolving<sup>4</sup>.

Turning our attention to an everyday site of public rhetoric can help illustrate the limitations of the ecology model. For example, we might consider one of the most interesting movements that has emerged in recent years—the hacker collective known as Anonymous. Originating in 2003 as a decentralized movement on 4chan, an imageboard known for anime and juvenile humor, Anonymous went on to achieve international fame for its distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against high-profile targets such as the Church of Scientology, the Ferguson, MO City Hall, ISIS, and the Trump campaign. Anonymous is often described as “anarchic” and “loosely organized.” Its members are all anonymous. Its organizational structure is anti-hierarchical. Its agenda is constantly evolving, seemingly without leadership. It is, in many ways, a profoundly ecological social movement. Quinn Norton captures the ecological nature of the Anonymous collective, describing it as a “sea of voices, all experimenting with new ways of being in the world.”

Describing the Anonymous collective as a messy ecology, however, discourages us from theorizing the historically-distinct dynamics that structure it. Such dynamics include a strange kind of anonymity that depends upon the

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<sup>4</sup> Ecological models have rarely considered the issue of power dynamics. Exceptions include Margaret Syverson, who in 1999 asked, “[H]ow do some agents—particular readers, writers, or texts, for instance—come to have a greater influence on such systems and why? How is that influence situated and exerted? Where complex systems do take a hierarchical form, how is the hierarchy structured and maintained—and at what costs and benefits to the system?” (202). Collin Gifford Brooke’s recent work has considered the hierarchical nature of networks. Noah Roderick, too, has written that our engagements with complexity science and network theory need not champion a “post-political project that naturalizes status-quo neoliberal capitalism” (3). And John Trimbur’s work, though it doesn’t draw upon the ecology metaphor, offers a valuable model for understanding the historical specificity of the “delivery systems” through which texts and capital circulate.

decentralized architecture of the web. While Anonymous broadcasts mimic the visual style of centralized media outlets, the organization has no leader or hierarchy. The affordances of networked communication enable a nebulous group of participants to collectively materialize the fantasy of a hierarchical secret order while remaining spatially distributed. In addition, the Anonymous collective's distinct iconography (Guy Fawkes masks, esoteric logos, glitchy surveillance-style videos) echoes mythic historical movements of the past. As Jason Huff writes, the collective's visual style is distinct to the internet age, in which "universal symbols of power" are "remixed and recycled." Improvements in technology, Huff writes, have disturbed "the once unbalanced relationship between large corporations and activists."

By ignoring historically-distinct factors such as these, we remain unaware of the emergence of new forms of public sociality, or "new ways of being in the world." And we lose the opportunity to reflect about how our own rhetorical acts might shape these forms.

### **Adding a Historical Perspective**

Drawing upon work in public sphere theory, I argue, can help attune us to the historically-distinct relational dynamics that animate particular movements and spaces of discourse. This body of work reminds us that the public sphere is not merely an endless flux, as the ecology model has tended to suggest. By inquiring into the ways that ecologies are shaped over time—how they are constantly constructed, maintained, naturalized, and subverted through the acts of individuals—we might become more attuned to the meaningful, and undeniably political, ways that rhetors

participate in the transformation of an “ecological” public sphere whose particularities we understand to be profoundly important. The works of Chantal Mouffe and Jürgen Habermas, for example, offer theoretical frameworks that help us consider the profoundly political nature of the relational dynamics that have animated the public sphere throughout history. In “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” Mouffe writes that the public sphere is structured by “forms of life” (Wittgenstein, qtd. in Mouffe 749) that become hegemonic through repetition and reinforcement. Any form of life that dominates in a particular time and place—pluralistic liberal democracy, for example—isn’t just a set of practices; it is also a “symbolic ordering of social relations” and “a specific form of organizing human coexistence politically” (“Democracy” 245). This focus on the historical specificity of particular forms of life has been characteristic of public sphere theory since its inception. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, for example, Habermas focuses his attention on the rise and fall of the liberal bourgeois public sphere, which was for a brief moment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an exemplar of “private people making use of their reason ... as a sphere of criticism of public authority” (51). Through his analysis of a double transformation—a “societalization” of the state and a “stateification” of society” (142)—Habermas traces the decline of the bourgeois public sphere and its replacement by the “mass society” that characterizes the contemporary era. And while critics have challenged both his diagnosis of the public sphere’s health and his prescription for its rehabilitation, they have shared Habermas’s belief that in order to understand the possible futures of the public sphere we must first take stock of the present,

situating our current moment on a historical timeline. By analyzing the current dynamics of the public sphere in the context of its perpetual transformation, public sphere theorists have attuned us to the process of “structural transformation” through which new forms of publicness emerge.

For rhetors who wish to transform the public sphere, a fusion of the ecology model and public sphere theory is valuable. By merging the fluidity offered by the ecology model and the historical attunement offered by public sphere theory, we can better theorize how to participate in shaping a public sphere that is always in flux but whose particularities are nevertheless of profound political importance. In doing so, we can think politically about how our own small acts of rhetoric work to reinforce the dominance of some “forms of life” over others.

If we return to an earlier example—the Anonymous movement—we can see how it signals the emergence of historically-distinct “forms of life.” For one, the material infrastructure of the internet supports the ability of Anonymous members to remain faceless and nameless while becoming public in ways that have rarely been available to ordinary citizens throughout history. In addition, the Anonymous movement exhibits forms of collective identity that hint at new styles of protest and resistance. Through novel practices of addressivity and uptake (often the sharing of memes and inside jokes) ordinary rhetors have participated in the emergence of a movement whose relational dynamics may prove more influential than its stated agenda.

The concept of an “ecology” gets us halfway there. And adding a historical perspective gets us further. But if we want to understand how we, as rhetors,



participate in shaping the “forms of life” that come to constitute the public sphere in particular times and places, we need to begin by recognizing a paradoxical duality at the heart of the concept of the public sphere—the forms of life that animate it are simultaneously material phenomena and *social imaginaries*. In other words, the dynamics of the public sphere—as concretely historical as they might seem—are as much “imagined” as they are real. Failing to recognize this paradoxical duality has led us, too often, to rely upon a limiting understanding of the ways that rhetors participate in shaping the dynamics of the public sphere. It has led us to overemphasize either the materiality of the public sphere or its “imagined” dimension. I now consider the extent to which a synthesis of the ecology model and public sphere theory can help us explore this duality in more meaningful ways.

### **The Ecology Model: Materiality Lacking an Imaginary**

The ideal model for theorizing public rhetoric is one that recognizes the intertwined nature of the material and the imagined dynamics of the public sphere, neglecting neither. Our models of the public sphere, however, have failed to capture the simultaneously material and imagined relations that are central to rhetorical practice, making it difficult to recognize the consequential ways that rhetors participate in shaping these relations. On one hand, we have models of the public sphere that assume the universality of a particular “social imaginary” (C. Taylor), regardless of historical context. The “conversation” model and the “counterpublicity” model both exemplify this static, ahistorical understanding of the public sphere. On the other hand, we have the “ecology” model, which places emphasis on the evolving material interrelations of the public sphere but fails to

attune us to the ways that rhetors and audiences imagine and reimagine their relations with one another over time.

Because the “ecology” model enables us to consider the transformation of human relations over time, I value this model’s potential for helping us theorize the complex, dispersed, and emergent material relations of the digital public sphere, which exceed the archetypes of “conversation” and “counterpublicity” that have historically configured our understanding of publicness. What this model lacks, however, is a means of attuning us to the important role that social imaginaries play in the transformation of the public sphere. By neglecting to consider the constitutive role that these social imaginaries play, the “ecology” model has limited our understanding of the profoundly rhetorical ways that rhetors and audiences create shared worlds through discourse. In doing so, this model misses an opportunity to attune rhetors to the means by which they might materialize new visions of the public sphere through their writing.

Marilyn Cooper’s critique of the cognitive process model of writing, for example, privileges the material over the imagined. Dismissing the study of invoked or imagined audiences, Cooper claims that “the cognitive act of analyzing [readers] or creating [readers] is superfluous” (372). She advocates, instead, the study of “real social beings” (372) and the “socially-constituted systems” (367) that these beings form in interaction with one another. This narrow emphasis on material interrelations is characteristic of scholarship rooted in the “ecology” model. Influenced by work in “new materialisms” and a broader “posthuman turn” in the humanities, a number of rhetoricians and compositionists have explored new ways

to theorize the dynamic nature of the material world. As Byron Hawk explains, humanist theories have often assumed a dichotomy between human intentions—which are seen as “active”—and material contexts—which are seen as “static and passive” (158). Reacting against this limiting conception of materiality, Hawk articulates a posthuman view of action influenced by the work of Katherine Hayles and Giles Deleuze, according to which “[a] human body does not create by itself. It enters into a situation, and the new form taken by that constellation plays out its own potentiality” (177). Margaret Syverson discusses the related idea of “distributed cognition,” drawing upon the work of Edwin Hutchins, whose studies of the complex dynamics of ship navigation have been a touchstone for the concept. As Syverson writes, Hutchins’s studies reveal that knowledge—and the knowledge-making work of writing—“depends on activities and communication in shared interactions not only among people but also interactions between people and various structures in the environment, from physical landmarks to technological instruments to graphical representations” (8). Similarly, Jim Ridolfo suggests that we need to turn our attention to “systems of human and non-human actors” in order to consider the new forms of agency that emerge when these systems “co-create with the rhetorician” (178).

Because the ecology model takes seriously the consequentiality of dispersed material constellations, this model encourages us to see rhetoric as an actor—or actant, in Latour’s terms—in its own right. As Jenny Edbauer writes, rhetoric operates as if it has a will of its own; it “attacks,” “invades” and “infects” events and bodies (14). In a similar vein, Laurie Gries argues for more attention to the vibrant

materiality of seemingly inert objects and environments, suggesting that an ecological understanding of circulation encourages us to include as actants far-flung constituents who are usually thought to be part of the “scene” or “context” or “milieu,” not part of the act itself.

The “ecology” model’s emphasis on materiality opens new avenues for studying the encounters of bodies, texts, objects, and environments. But the “ecology” model, in its current form, gives little consideration to the role that social imaginaries play in shaping the dynamics of complex ecologies. To illustrate the point, we might consider how the “ecology” model might conceptualize an everyday scene of public discourse. We might look, for example, at an online comment thread that evolved in response to the removal of a confederate war monument in 2017. With its focus on material interrelations and complex circulatory dynamics, the “ecology” model might focus our attention on the ways that participants’ bodies are distributed in space, the ways that they are linked to one another through the material infrastructures of the internet, and the tools that they use to circulate messages that come to “infect” the larger material ecology. The “ecology” model might even help us consider the embodied histories of these participants, whose affective engagements with the comment thread can be theorized as an economy of circulating energies. But what the “ecology” model hasn’t yet helped us understand is the extent to which this discursive space operates according to social imaginaries that profoundly shape its dynamics. It is only by attuning ourselves to the operation of social imaginaries that we can put together a more complete picture of how a transnational digital infrastructure, a thousand bodies dispersed in space, and a

programmed interface come to create something that feels like a “space” of deliberation and social interaction.

### **Adding Imaginaries**

Rather than rejecting “imagined” and “invoked” audiences as irredeemably fictional and fleeting—existing only in the minds of individuals—I propose that rhetoricians and compositionists should theorize imagining as a public practice, as something that strangers do together, en masse. Doing so, I argue, can encourage rhetors to reflect about how their own semiotic, material, and embodied resources can be put to use for the purposes of imagining and materializing the kinds of worlds that they wish to inhabit. To investigate this phenomenon of imagining with strangers, we might do well to draw upon a strand of theory that wends its way through the fields of history (Mah), literary theory (Warner), linguistics (Bakhtin) and rhetoric (Asen and Brouwer, C. Miller, “The Polis”). This strand of theory focuses on the interplay between our material relations and our *social imaginaries*.

According to historian Harold Mah, for example, the defining characteristic of the public sphere is its counterintuitive duality—it is both a concrete arena and a social imaginary. In Mah’s formulation, the public sphere is a fiction that is continually transformed into a social-material reality. And it is a social-material reality that continually provides the grounding for fictions. For Mah, in other words, the public sphere is a “political imaginary” that nevertheless comes to “exert a real force” (168). As he demonstrates, however, many of Habermas’s critics have failed to grasp the paradoxical interplay between the material and the imagined dynamics of the public sphere. By assuming that the term “public sphere” refers to a concrete

arena or a body of citizens that inhabits a concrete arena, Mah writes, historians have instinctively theorized the public sphere “in ‘spatialized’ terms, as a domain that one can enter, occupy, and leave” (160). As Mah points out, however, the term *Öffentlichkeit* (usually translated as “public sphere”) is much more—in Habermas’s original German—than a label for a particular space or body of citizens.

*Öffentlichkeit* doesn’t have a clear English equivalent, but can be translated as “publicity,” “publicness,” or simply “public.” In Habermas’s original formulation, then, becoming public means not only joining the fray of “dissenting social groups” (160) that gather in particular kinds of material spaces. It also means abstracting oneself, with strangers, as a unified subject—a “public”—through a process that requires “a phantasmic reshaping of social identity” (164).

James Schmidt, drawing upon Mah’s work, reiterates the fact that *Öffentlichkeit* was never meant to be a concrete deliberative arena. Though the public sphere “may ‘present itself’ as a space, Schmidt writes, it is central to Habermas’s argument that its success in presenting itself in this way was grounded in a ‘fiction’: namely, the fiction that ‘property owners’ are the same things as ‘the human beings pure and simple.’ It is only thanks to this fiction that certain physical spaces (e.g. everyone’s favorite part of ‘the Enlightenment public sphere,’ the coffee house) could come to be seen as part of that more expansive network of institutions that make up ‘the public.’” In other words, assuming the concrete spatiality of the public sphere from the get-go leads us to ignore the role of the “fictions” that shape its transformation over time. In doing so, we remain blind to the processes according to which particular fictions *become* concretely spatial. This neglect of the

constitutive role that social imaginaries play in the public sphere has led us to undervalue the “phantasmic” processes through which everyday rhetors—and their small acts of rhetoric—participate in shaping our collective identities.

This “phantasmic” understanding of the public sphere, although largely neglected in public writing pedagogy, has nonetheless been central to the work of a number of rhetorical theorists. Their work is worth reviewing here. Carolyn Miller, for example, has taken up the phantasmic nature of rhetorical practice in ways that align with Mah’s work. Her piece “The Polis as Rhetorical Community” considers the chicken-and-egg paradoxes that characterize the relationship between rhetoric and the polis—from Isocrates, for whom discourse is a precondition of social order, to Plato, whose authoritarian vision of the polis imagines rhetoric as nothing more than a tool of the state, to Aristotle, who asserts that “the community is generative of the specific shape and materials of discourse” (233). Comparing these theories enables Miller to conclude, ultimately, that the polis should be understood not only as a “social space” that people inhabit but also as “a discursive projection, a set of assumptions implicit in any argument; it is the community invoked, represented, presupposed, or developed in rhetorical discourse” (239). In other words, the polis is—at every moment—a real place *and* a projection of discourse.

In a similar vein, Michael Warner focuses on “the odd social imaginary established by the ethic of estrangement and social poesis in public address” (113). In Warner’s formulation, a public sphere is a social imaginary that is constantly being pitched and taken up by strangers, who interface with one another by abstracting themselves into discursive space in culturally inventive ways.

Essentially, Warner's concept of social poesis is an elaboration of the "phantasmic" understanding of the public sphere articulated in the works of Mah and Miller.

And while terms like "phantasmic," "imaginary," "projection," and "poesis" connote a kind of freedom that we associate with daydreaming, I want to argue that increased attention to the public sphere's social imaginaries deepens our understanding of the very material processes that shape it. Warner's public sphere, for example, isn't just an imagined public sphere. With each "projection" of a public, a text attempts to "characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate" and "realize that world through address" (114). Like Mah and Miller, Warner cares about social imaginaries primarily because these "fictions" play a constitutive role in shaping the dynamics of the material world.

By focusing on the interplay of material ecologies and social imaginaries, we might come to see a contentious online comment thread not only as an amalgamation of bodies, messages, and energies but also as what Susan Miller has called an "idealized textual space" (40). This is a space that consists of imagined audiences and invoked authors, projected into the world as "fictions" that we invite others to inhabit. As Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior write, establishing "co-presence" with others means establishing a kind of "shared interactional space" (19)—or, in the work of Erving Goffman, an entire "interactional order" (25). By using metaphors of embodiment and spatiality to describe the imagined worlds that readers and writers inhabit, these theorists suggest that the shouting matches and flame-wars that characterize digital discourse do happen in a kind of "space," despite the discrepancy between this imagined space and the material space that



our bodies inhabit. When digital writers argue, for example, about the merits of removing public statues of confederate generals, they seem to inhabit a deliberative arena that echoes the salons and coffeehouses of the bourgeois public sphere. Collectively, they imagine this space into existence, reinforcing habituated practices that over time become the common sense of the public sphere.

Through the use of semiotic, material, and embodied resources, rhetors have at their disposal many of the tools needed to participate in shaping social imaginaries that have lasting effects on public discourse and social movements. What rhetors have lacked, however, is a model of public rhetoric that recognizes the ways that their small acts shape ecologies whose dynamics are simultaneously material and imagined. By augmenting the “ecology” model’s focus on material interrelations with public sphere theory’s focus on social imaginaries, I believe that we can remedy the inadequacies of both bodies of scholarship, paving the way for a more accurate accounting of the complex interplay between the material and the imagined. In order to theorize this interplay, I believe that we need a new model of the public sphere. I turn, now, to this task, drawing upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to articulate an *infrastructural* model of the public sphere that affirms the crucial role that both material and “imagined” phenomena play in shaping its historically-distinct dynamics.

### **Investing in the Ecological Infrastructure of the Public Sphere**

I have argued that if we want to understand how rhetors contribute to the transformations of the contexts in which they write, we need to revise our “ecology” model to better account for 1) the historical evolution of the public sphere and 2)

the paradoxically material and “imagined” nature of the public sphere. I have suggested that we might achieve this aim by augmenting the ecology model with elements of public sphere theory. The result would be a model of the public sphere that recognizes its *infrastructural* character, acknowledging that the public sphere is both distinct and in flux, and that it is both material and imagined. More specifically, I propose a model that conceptualizes the public sphere not as a particular kind of space or social formation but instead as an evolving *ecological infrastructure*—both material and imagined—through which a variety of practices and processes are enacted.

I use the term ecological infrastructure for three reasons. First, the term evokes the endless transformation of the public sphere. “Infrastructure” expresses the fact that the public sphere is a phenomenon that is built and rebuilt over time. Its dynamics are durable, lasting longer than the present moment. At the same time, its dynamics are always under construction. Second, the term “infrastructure” productively troubles the distinction between structure (“ecology”) and agent (rhetor). Rather than trying to quantify the measure of agency that an individual rhetor possesses or the measure of influence that an ecology exerts upon a rhetor, the concept of an ecological infrastructure focuses our attention on the collective ways that distributed webs of people, objects, technologies, semiotic resources, and environments seem to “invest” in the building and maintenance of complex ecologies. Third, the term ecological infrastructure hints at the fact that the current dynamics of the public sphere shape future action in consequential ways. An infrastructure is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the underlying foundation or

basic framework (as of a system or organization)” and “the resources (such as personnel, buildings, or equipment) required for an activity.” An infrastructure, then, is a structure that makes future practices and processes possible. It is this definition in particular that I want to elaborate upon here. Theorizing the public sphere as an ecological infrastructure helps us remember that it serves as a foundation—though a highly dynamic foundation—upon which our everyday rhetorical practices depend. An ecological infrastructure delimits the ways that rhetors and audiences become relational with one another. At the same time, this infrastructure is built and maintained through the acts of rhetors and audiences, who continually shape its dynamics, leaving behind them a wake in which other writers and audiences become rhetorical. Understanding the ways that rhetors shape this deep structure of the public sphere can help us better understand how everyday acts of rhetoric, distributed across space and time, contribute to the building and maintenance of structures too immense in scale and complexity to be engineered by a single rhetor.

In sum, I propose the concept of ecological infrastructure as a catchall term for the simultaneously material and imagined dynamics within which rhetors and audiences are always enmeshed. When studying the transformation of a particular public sphere, this concept might enable us to ask important questions about the role of the rhetor: *How do rhetors and audiences—through small, everyday acts—participate in the building and maintenance of this ecological infrastructure? How does this ecological infrastructure shape the nature of rhetorical action?*

Conceptualizing the public sphere as an ecological infrastructure, I argue, can help

us study the ways that individual rhetors invest in the future of this infrastructure *and* the ways that this infrastructure simultaneously invests in the work of individual rhetors.

### **A “Posthuman” Understanding of Rhetorical Practice?**

How can individuals practice rhetoric in a “posthuman” world? Though some in our field have started to discuss the ways that rhetors shape the ecologies that they inhabit, we have only begun to hint at the possibilities of recognizing how rhetors participate in building and maintaining the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. In this section, I argue that a “posthuman” tendency in rhetoric and composition studies has productively challenged our understanding of the agency of individual rhetors. But I argue, as well, that this posthuman understanding of rhetorical practice hasn’t yet enabled us to consider the ways that rhetors contribute to the building and maintenance of the ecologies that they inhabit.

The ecological models proposed by scholars such as Syverson, Hawk, Cooper, Edbauer, Gries, and others are emblematic of this “posthuman” understanding of rhetorical practice. Shifting our attention away from the agentive practices of individuals and toward the emergent properties of crowds, networks, and flows, these theorists have productively widened our understanding of the rhetorical situation, challenging the autonomy of the individual agent by exposing the radically interconnected nature of the contexts that she inhabits. This ecology model has asked us, in other words, to see agents as nodes within larger “constellations of humans and nonhumans” (Pflugfelder 124), and ultimately as “indistinguishable from the system itself” (Dobrin 133). As Laurie Gries writes, an ecological

perspective has encouraged us to “realize that this entire web of life is actually a dynamic dance in which people, discourse, technologies, other entities and our environments intra-act to co-construct our daily materialities” (“Agential Matters” 88). According to this ecology model, being a rhetor depends less upon one’s ability to leverage the available means of persuasion and more upon one’s ability to adapt to the changing dynamics of one’s ecology, often unconsciously. Essentially, the ecology model is premised upon the idea that an agent’s rhetorical acts can do little more than help her adapt to the evolving dynamics of fundamentally unpredictable systems.

However, even when engaging with the radically “posthuman” philosophies of Giles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, Mark C. Taylor, Jane Bennett, and others, rhetoricians and compositionists have not done away with the concept of agency. We have simply looked for different kinds of agency, defining the power of the rhetor in much more limited terms. Rather than conceiving of agency as an individual’s ability to predict and enact instrumental action on a large scale, these scholars have reconceptualized agency in terms of rhetors’ ongoing processes of attunement, adaptation, and cultivation. Noah Roderick, for example, writes that “the writer’s agency in a complex ecology depends upon her ability to successfully adapt to new settings by making analogies to her experience of prior settings.” Syverson writes that agents are constantly “moving into coordination with each other and their environment” (68) by using “internal structures” (6) to make predictions about unfolding situations. Hawk claims that being able to anticipate and co-adapt with a moment is a “vital rhetorical skill” that one can develop over

time (185). And Thomas Rickert suggests that we see both a writer and her environment as unified when they “mutually tak[e] part in” (916) the singular moment of the present situation, an unrepeatable, unfolding, co-adaptive amalgamation that he terms an “ambience.”

In short, the ecology model has enabled us to theorize the relatively diminished measure of rhetorical agency that humans possess in a “posthuman” world. We know, according to the ecology model, that rhetoric happens within a complex web of interrelations between humans, nonhumans, the discursive, and the material. And we know—if we extend Cooper’s metaphor—some of the many ways that rhetors might participate in the spinning and re-spinning of this web. Yet while the ecology model has helped us to productively theorize the limits of human agency, and even to develop pedagogies that put these theories into practice (Edbauer, Rivers and Weber, Hawk “Curating Ecologies,” Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel, Gogan), it has not yet enabled rhetoricians and compositionists to consider the ways that rhetors continually participate in the building and maintenance of the ecologies within which they are enmeshed. To better attune ourselves to this *infrastructural* dimension of public rhetoric, I argue that we need to develop a model of rhetorical practice that does more than theorize how rhetors “adapt to,” “coordinate with,” and “cultivate” these ecologies. We need to develop a model of rhetorical practice that helps us understand how rhetors collectively *invest* in an infrastructure, shaping it in lasting ways. By theorizing the ways that rhetors invest in an infrastructure that is both material and “imagined,” and that is always being made and remade through small acts linked ecologically across space and time, we

lay the foundation for a better understanding of the role that rhetors play in the transformation of the public sphere.

To understand how rhetors shape the public sphere, however, it is not enough to say that the public sphere should be understood as an ecological infrastructure. In order to study the ways that rhetors invest in the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure within which they are enmeshed, we need a theoretical language with which to talk about the dynamics of this infrastructure. We need to be able to talk about how the dynamics of today's ecological infrastructure are different from those of the early 1900s, and different from those that will characterize the public sphere next year. We need a language for talking about how particular ecological infrastructures work, and for talking about the passage of historical time. Bakhtin's *chronotope* is a concept that makes this kind of analysis possible. Originally, Bakhtin coined the term *chronotope* to theorize "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). A chronotope, according to this definition, is a time-space logic embedded in a genre. And though Bakhtin articulated the concept of the chronotope through an analysis of "various histories of generic heterogeneity in the European novel" (85), chronotopic analysis has not been limited to artistic or literary texts. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope has been adapted for the study of rhetorical genres (Schryer, "Genre Time=Space"; Schryer, "Genre and Power"; Crossley; Artemeva), electronic discourse (Bostad), and the spatiotemporal frames that delimit debate and action in the public sphere (Jack). The concept of the chronotope has been leveraged not only for descriptive purposes

but also to analyze the ideological assumptions embedded in discourse—in particular, to analyze the ways that enacted logics of time and space regulate the contours of the social world. Like Walter Ong’s “fictional” audience and Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s “audience invoked,” Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope encourages us to consider how rhetoric orients senders and receivers in relation to one another within the intersubjective “space” of discourse.

While the chronotope has been taken up by many rhetorical scholars, my use of the term is rooted in the work of Paul Prior and Jody Shipka, who argue that we might pursue a reading of Bakhtin’s later work that expands its scope beyond the written word. The concept of the chronotope, they argue, can help us theorize not just the texts that we read but also the spatiotemporal dynamics of the embodied world that we live in. They write

For Bakhtin, the chronotope became emblematic of a fractured ontology—a complex fluid unfinalized and unfinalizable world—in which representational chronotopes (those on paper, in talk, and in the mind) co-evolve[] with embodied chronotopes, the actual concrete times, places, and events of life. Or perhaps it would be best to say that Bakhtin came to view all chronotopes as embodied-representational—with concrete time-place-events deeply furrowed with, and constructed through, representations and with representations always deeply rooted in chains of concrete historical events.” (186)

Prior and Shipka’s expansive interpretation of the chronotope troubles an all-too-common assumption about discourse—namely, that it occurs in a disembodied,



virtual, immaterial realm somehow separate from the one that we inhabit. According to their reading of Bakhtin, chronotopes are continually materialized, subverted, repurposed, and reinforced not only *within* texts but also in the imminently material world that our bodies inhabit. Understanding the chronotope as simultaneously material and “imagined,” in other words, draws attention to the fact that the spatial and temporal dynamics that we experience when we engage with texts are intimately connected with the spatial and temporal dynamics of the world that we live in.

Considering the chronotope’s simultaneously material and “imagined” nature has enabled scholars to investigate varied phenomena. Jan Blommaert, for example, writes of the fundamentally chronotopic nature of social identities, which are always constrained by “roles, discourses, modes of interaction, dress, codes of conduct, criteria for judgment of appropriate versus inappropriate behavior, and so forth” (3). And Chelsea Milbourne and Sarah Hallenbeck apply Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope to the gendered history of the microscope, considering how this material object has carried with it “a spatio-temporal user orientation produced and stabilized through users’ routinized and embodied performances” (403). This understanding of Bakhtin’s concept encourages us to pay attention to the ways that writers invoke spatial and temporal qualities in an “imagined” textual world. But it also encourages us to pay attention to the ways that we inhabit material spaces with others—how, in other words, we inhabit material ecologies in which people, objects, technologies, semiotic resources, and environments are continually positioned and

repositioned in relation to one another according to particular spatiotemporal dynamics.

This understanding of Bakhtin's chronotope is not without theoretical challenges. Conceptualizing the chronotope as both material and "imagined," as Bakhtin does, means referring to things that happen in texts and things that happen in the "real world" using a single term. An even stranger theoretical challenge, however, is the fact that the term "chronotope" has been used to refer to both spatiotemporal dynamics that have been realized in particular instances—whether in material or "imagined" form—and spatiotemporal dynamics that exist as cultural "tropes" that can be deployed by rhetors.

First, a chronotope can be a spatiotemporal trope. Alexandra Ganser, Julia Pühringer, and Markus Rheindorf, for example, study the ways that films such as *Easy Rider* and *Thelma and Louise* have reinforced a chronotope of "the road" that has served as the foundation of a genre of "adventure narrative" storytelling for thousands of years. They draw upon Bakhtin's discussion of the ways that these "adventure narratives" reinforce a chronotope in which "people separated by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet" in a "time out of joint" (3). "A meeting," as Bakhtin writes, "is one of the most ancient devices for structuring a plot in the epic" (98). This ancient device depends upon "the close link between the motif of meeting and the chronotope of the road ('the open road')." As Bakhtin writes, this "open road" chronotope works to create narratives characterized by "random contingency"—characters meet and interact as if their separate worlds are, through chance encounters that hinge on "simultaneity" and "chance disjunctions in time,"

bound together by the road itself. In the “virtual, lexical space” (Ganser et al. 3) of the novel, this spatiotemporal trope orients characters and readers in relation to typified scenes and actions.

At the same time, a chronotope is never just a recurring trope; the term also refers to the actual *worlds* that these spatiotemporal tropes work to materialize, both in discursive space and in the “real world” that we inhabit. Though we know, as readers, that Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty exist in a world as expansive and varied as the world that we all inhabit, the spatiotemporal world of “the road” serves to orient them, and us, in *a world in which time and space work in particular ways*. In *On the Road*, as in other stories animated by the chronotope of “the road,” we come to experience the passage of time not through the daily routines of characters. Nor do we experience the passage of time through changes in the world that these characters inhabit. Instead, we experience the passage of time as a function of motion through space. Characters and readers operate in a world in which “time spent means ground covered” (3). As Ganser, Pühringer, and Rheindorf write, “internal time takes precedence over historical time” (3); events beyond the road and its immediate surroundings are deemphasized. Time becomes a factor of space. Space becomes a factor of time.

Because the term “chronotope” has been used to refer to both a spatiotemporal trope that rhetors can deploy *and* a particular kind of world that the deployment of such a trope works to materialize, I have chosen to differentiate between the two meanings of the term. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term chronotope to refer to a spatiotemporal trope that rhetors can deploy. I use the term

*spatiotemporal worlds* to refer to the worlds that these chronotopes work to materialize (successfully or not), in both material and “imagined” space.

Hence, we might consider the ways that the “open road” chronotope, as a trope, has shaped the spatiotemporal worlds that we inhabit. First, this chronotope has shaped how we conceptualize long-distance road travel as a “road trip,” a culturally specific kind of happening that orients participants in a kind of “world.” This chronotope has also shaped the built environment, contributing to the development of tourist infrastructures that mirror the adventure narrative’s “random contingency” and “chance meetings” through promises of novelty and local color. This chronotope has shaped the ways that individuals, equipped with the cognitive tools to participate in this spatiotemporal world, conceptualize and enact the “open road” chronotope with others (both the people who they travel with and the people who they meet along the way). We even participate in these worlds when we immerse ourselves in fiction or non-fiction narrative, when we play video games, and when we live temporarily in the worlds that films create for us. In sum, the worlds that I call *spatiotemporal worlds* materialize across scales and media—in the discursive spaces that rhetors participate in together, in the cognitive “imaginaries” that these rhetors and audiences carry with them, in the embodied interactions of these rhetors and audiences, and in the built environment. All of these are worlds that we inhabit.

On the other hand, it is important to note that chronotopes aren’t only causes; they are also effects. The chronotopes that rhetors deploy are rooted in the worlds that they inhabit, which make particular spatiotemporal dynamics available

in particular times and places. To theorize this reflexive relationship between chronotopes and spatiotemporal worlds, it is important to consider not only how rhetors use chronotopes to get things done but also how the worlds that rhetors inhabit give chronotopes their power, making them intelligible and consequential.

This reflexive understanding of the relationship between spatiotemporal worlds and rhetorical practices has been influenced by Michael Warner's concept of "world making." As he writes, "Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after, one must postulate some kind of link" (90). According to Warner, the future-orientated nature of "world making" means that it can't happen in a vacuum. It is an inherently political engagement with the world as it is, not a purely creative attempt to bring forth a new world. Hence, questions about the ways that we "invoke" the public sphere are never far from ethical questions about the worlds that we inhabit and the worlds that we wish to inhabit.

I believe that attempting to theorize the interplay between the chronotopes that we deploy and the spatiotemporal worlds that we inhabit has productive implications for the study of the public sphere. Jordynn Jack's study of public debate about GMO legislation informs my understanding of the relationship between these concepts. As Jack demonstrates, the public's sense of urgency about a rhetorical situation, and the ways that they conceptualize their own roles in relation to possible solutions, depends crucially upon how they orient themselves in space and time by drawing upon chronotopes from their past experiences. In arguments, she writes, "one chronotope may become *rhetorically* dominant in ways that shape the overall argument and its effects, while other chronotopes may lurk at the margins or

compete for the center. The dominant chronotopes are often those that best sum up or exemplify dominant ideologies in a given rhetorical moment” (54). As Jack writes, “some chronotopes tend to support a neoliberal economic ideology, one that pushes for unrestrained biotechnology development, while others are inclined to support ideologies of sustainability and environmentalism, which seek to ensure that these products will harm the ecologies into which they are introduced” (53).

Jack’s focus on the ideological consequences of the chronotope encourages us to reconsider the universality of the “open road” chronotope. When we consider the writing of Ijeoma Oluo, for example, we see that a person’s ability to inhabit the spatiotemporal world of a “road trip,” as it has been materialized through the “road” chronotope, can be structured by race. For Oluo, the road is not a space in which “historical time” falls away, leaving behind an experience of pure movement and contingency. Traveling across country as a Black woman, she instead inhabits a spatiotemporal world characterized by suspicion, racialized social imaginaries, and dangerous territories:

I’m on a road trip with my kids across the western half of this country. Travelling while black can be.....nervewracking. Not just the little micro-agressions, but the fears for safety. We still live in a country where black people are shot in the face for asking for help after car accidents. When I said I was going on this trip, a lot of people reached out to me concerned. Did I have an emergency plan? Did I know the places I was going was safe?

While Oluo occupies a material space that has often been animated by the “road” chronotope, she experiences a very different spatiotemporal world in this space. Focusing attention on this ideological dimension of the chronotope, Jack writes, “the relationship between space and time is always value-oriented, reflecting societal assumptions about the place of human individuals in space and time and the kind of

action allowed within that space and time ... chronotopes delimit both the potentials and the constraints of rhetorical action in a given space and time” (68).

My application of Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope is indebted to Jack’s work. It extends her focus on the consequential ways that chronotopes delimit how we might take action in the public sphere. Yet while her focus is on the ways that particular arguments affect particular audiences, and in turn how these audiences are moved to act about particular issues of common concern, my focus is instead on the ways that particular spatiotemporal worlds shape how strangers *associate* and *socialize*. My focus, in other words, is on the ways that we become relational with one another in the public sphere, and in turn how our practices transform the public sphere over time. Rather than conceptualizing relationality through fixed archetypes of “conversation” or “counterpublicity,” as our public writing pedagogies have tended to do, or conceptualizing relationality as an endlessly fluid but ultimately formless cluster of relations, as the ecology model has tended to do, a focus on the spatiotemporal dynamics of the public sphere attunes us to the consequential nature of the worlds that we build together. Through the building of these spatiotemporal worlds, rhetors work to orient strangers in relation one another during particular rhetorical situations. But they also leave more lasting legacies. By working to materialize particular kinds of spatiotemporal worlds, rhetors reinforce the relations that constitute the public sphere’s *ecological infrastructure*. A cluster of relations built and maintained by a dispersed network of constituents, this infrastructure lays the groundwork for the building of new spatiotemporal worlds. Hence, attending to the spatiotemporal dynamics of the

public sphere is a way to consider how individual acts of rhetoric might be related to the larger *infrastructures* of the public sphere, which ultimately delimit the ways that rhetors become relational with one another.

Because this infrastructural model of the public sphere attunes us to the “unfinalized and unfinalizable” (Bakhtin 186) nature of the public sphere, and because it attunes us to the ways that rhetors participate in the reinforcement of the evolving relational dynamics of this world, it serves to augment the work of public sphere theorists Mouffe, Habermas, and Mah, who focus on the complex historical transformation of the public sphere. This infrastructural model also resonates with Jodie Nicotra’s discussion of the nature of digital writing in “‘Folksonomy’ and the Restructuring of Writing Space.” In this piece, Nicotra draws upon the work of Johndan Johnson-Eilola, who defines writing not as a textual artifact produced by an individual acting alone but instead as “THE RECURSIVE, SHARED, (AND SOMETIMES ABSCONDED WITH) COORDINATION OR BUILDING OF SPACES AND FIELDS” (W263, formatting in original). As Nicotra explains, this definition encourages us to understand writing as a process that is spatial and architectural, not linear and time-bound. Writing is “the *building of a space* rather than the production of a text” (W263). This spatial and architectural dimension of rhetorical practice is especially apparent, Nicotra writes, in the contexts of digital communication. Whereas older rhetorical venues—the law courts, the agora, the pulpit, the newspaper—were fully developed “spaces” with their own typified conventions, the spaces that we create through the use of networked technologies are built and maintained largely by users. They change quickly. And these worlds are open to rearticulation and



reinvention in ways that most rhetorical venues are not. The digital public sphere is, in short, an ideal venue through which to examine how rhetors *invest* in the building and maintenance of ecological infrastructures through their public interactions.

I have chosen to use the metaphor of “investment” to refer to the ways that rhetors and audiences shape ecological infrastructures. Each time that a rhetor addresses strangers, she contributes to the building and maintenance of a complex, distributed, and emergent infrastructure that makes future action possible. For example, each time that a rhetor uses a phrase such as “I understand what you’re saying, but at the same time ...,” she invokes a Rogerian public sphere in which the goal of deliberation is to understand and evaluate the opinions of others. Though this attempt to reach common ground with one’s interlocutors has been naturalized to such an extent that it does not seem remarkable, we can contrast it with other kinds of public spheres that a rhetor can invoke—from those characterized by agonistic debate to those characterized by the mobilization of strangers to those characterized by individual expression.

I value this investment metaphor not only because the phrase “investing in infrastructure” has become a stock phrase in political stump speeches. I also appreciate how this metaphor hints at the cooperative, anonymous, and distributed nature of collective ownership. When a multitude invests in shaping the dynamics of an ecology, no particular agent has a controlling stake in the process. In addition to referencing collective ownership in the financial realm, the “investment” metaphor evokes the ways that we devote energy to pursuits that we care about. The metaphor references the fact that we invest ourselves—emotionally, intellectually,

and physically—in the work that we do as individuals. Far from being simply byproducts of our ecologies, humans operate based on personal commitments, participating willfully—though not always consciously—in reinforcing particular chronotopes over others, and in turn participating in the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere.

In other words, investment can be understood as an ecological phenomenon and as an individual phenomenon. Through complex, distributed processes, stakeholders work to reinforce the dominance of particular spatiotemporal dynamics, or chronotopes. But there are also ways that individuals invest in this infrastructure, reinforcing the dominance of particular chronotopes through willed acts of rhetoric. Their acts contribute, in small ways, to the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. In sum, then, investment is a concept that hints at the fundamentally “posthuman” nature of rhetorical practice as well as the fundamentally human ways that we commit ourselves to local projects that we care about.<sup>5</sup>

Because of my own commitments as a writing instructor, I am particularly interested in shining a spotlight on the ways that *individual* acts shape the infrastructure of the public sphere. But both ways to talk about investment—as an ecological phenomenon and as an individual act—are ways to talk about the same thing—namely, a process according to which distributed webs of people, objects, technologies, semiotic resources, and environments shape the ecological

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<sup>5</sup> My use of the term “investment” has been influenced by the work of Deborah Brandt, who considers the ways that literacy sponsors consciously or unconsciously “enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (25).

infrastructure of the public sphere. By locating willed rhetorical acts within a larger phenomenon of rhetorical investment, I avoid an excessive focus on individual agency that has often characterized the study of rhetorical practice within complex ecologies. It is intentional, in other words, that my definition of investment does not distinguish between agentive acts and non-agentive acts. Any act that contributes to the building and maintenance of an ecological infrastructure is a consequential—and therefore political—act, no matter the measure of agency attributed to the actor herself. Rather than trying to find a suitable middle ground between unfettered agency and complete submission to larger structures, I argue that we can best attune ourselves to the ways that rhetors invest in the future of the public sphere by setting aside questions of intentionality and agency, at least temporarily.

Rhetoric, according to this infrastructural model of the public sphere, is not merely a tool to be used in instrumental ways. And it is not merely a means of attuning oneself to the unpredictable dynamics of a complex ecology. Rhetoric, instead, also refers to the ways that individuals—using the means available to them—participate in the building of spatiotemporal worlds that foster particular kinds of relationality. Through the building of these spatiotemporal worlds, rhetors work to orient strangers in relation to one another during particular rhetorical situations. But they also leave more lasting legacies. By fostering particular kinds of relationality within these spatiotemporal worlds, rhetors alter the ecological infrastructure within which others can become rhetorical, laying the groundwork for the building of new spatiotemporal worlds.

## **Investing in the Ecological Infrastructure of the Public Sphere: An Illustration**

In this chapter, I have developed a model of the public sphere that highlights the ways that rhetors invest—through small, everyday acts—in its ecological infrastructure. To illustrate the kinds of willed rhetorical investments that an infrastructural model of the public sphere might help us consider, I now turn to Edbauer's 2005 case study of the viral circulation and reappropriation of the slogan “Keep Austin Weird.” In her article “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” Edbauer argues that Lloyd Bitzer’s concept of the rhetorical situation offers an inadequate accounting of the ways that rhetoric circulates. For the purposes of this discussion, the most salient aspect of the article is Edbauer’s contention that the slogan “Keep Austin Weird” spread throughout Austin like a virus, propagating itself by infecting hosts with a “shared contagion.” Re-reading the circulation of the slogan through both an ecological lens and an infrastructural lens, I illustrate the benefits of the infrastructural model.

Despite my critiques of the ecology model, I believe that Edbauer’s discussion of the slogan “Keep Austin Weird” highlights the importance of understanding rhetoric as an ecological phenomenon. Moving beyond Lloyd Bitzer’s model of the rhetorical situation, which imagines each rhetorical act to be a “fitting” response to the contingencies of audience, purpose, and exigence, Edbauer’s model helps us see how rhetoric spreads—like an infection—through material spaces that are always-already structured by traces of affect, experience, and mood. Rather than locating rhetoric in a rhetorical situation, in other words, Edbauer demonstrates the value of considering the larger “rhetorical ecology” within which it circulates. She

encourages rhetoricians and compositionists to recognize that rhetoric operates as a “shared contagion,” sprouting up in unexpected places as it circulates across time and space. According to this ecology model, a rhetor does not simply respond to a situation. Rhetoric moves. Rhetoric transforms. Its “viral intensities” inhabit the bodies of hosts, like parasites.

Edbauer’s model of rhetorical ecologies decenters the human. Instead of understanding the individual rhetor as a seat of origin, Edbauer sees her as just one node in the “affective channels” and “networks of lived practical consciousness” through which messages circulate. While I appreciate the ways that this ecological perspective has encouraged us to consider the radically “posthuman” nature of the ecologies within which we are enmeshed, I believe that Edbauer’s model fails to adequately highlight the historically-distinct human processes that support the building and maintenance of rhetorical ecologies. In particular, I argue that because it tends to obscure the historical nature of the public sphere and the paradoxically material and imagined nature of the public sphere, Edbauer’s ecological model provides an inadequate grounding for theorizing the consequential ways that willed human acts shape the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere.

We can look, for example, at the ways that Edbauer’s ecological model makes sense of the parodies and rearticulations of “Keep Austin Weird” that circulated throughout Austin and beyond (“Make Austin Normal,” “Keep Austin Reading,” “Keep Austin Liberal Arts,” etc.). Each “counter-rhetoric,” she explains, “expand[ed] the lived experience of the original rhetorics by *adding* to them—even while changing and expanding their shape” (19). In her words, an ecology model helps

attune us to the “extended half-life” (20) of circulating rhetorics and “the ‘force of messages,’ as they accrete over time” (20). While Edbauer’s ecological model helps us see that “Keep Austin Weird” is certainly a “viral” phenomenon that seems to have taken on a life of its own, an infrastructural model reminds us that it is also the result of a long and unknowable history of rhetors, distributed in space and time, who have made particular kinds of investments in the spatiotemporal dynamics, or chronotopes, that have come to dominate the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. For example, when a writer addresses her audience with a phrase such as “For everybody out there who ...,” she invokes the spatial dimension of the public sphere, imagining herself as a broadcaster addressing a vast audience of listeners who are “out there.” Though this has become a commonsense way for writers to interact with “the public,” the kind of relationality that it creates between writers and readers is only possible because it has been made “normal” through an aggregation of small, everyday acts.

This is especially clear when we consider practices of parody and appropriation, which depend upon finely-tuned cultural habits of writing and reading. We could choose to see parodies and appropriations of “Keep Austin Weird” as nothing more than “mutations,” as Edbauer does. In doing so, we would be focusing our attention on how the slogan itself has moved and changed. But this seems to minimize the work of rhetors and audiences, whose habituated rhetorical practices make the viral circulation of this slogan possible. As interesting as it might be to consider the slogan to be an “actant” in its own right, we should recognize that “Make Austin Weird” would remain dead and inanimate if it weren’t for the work of

people, whose moments of recognition and humor and anger and belief and inventiveness and amplification make it meaningful in the world.

The slogan, in other words, is not just a “virus” looking for a host. It is also a tool that humans use to coordinate their own relationships with one another—a rhetorical genre.

Genres are, as Carolyn R. Miller has argued, ways of “acting together” (163) that are sedimented through the repetition of “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159). Each genre has a history. There is a clear family resemblance, for example, between the “Keep Austin \_\_\_\_\_” meme and the “Got \_\_\_\_\_?” meme (originally from a series of “Got Milk?” commercials that became famous in the 90s). Rhetors and audiences have learned how to locate themselves in relation to both “Keep Austin Weird” and “Keep Austin Liberal Arts,” and to imagine themselves as part of an audience—an Austin, TX public—that is supposed to “get it.” This practice of imagining oneself as part of a particular kind of public, of locating oneself in space and time in relation to a text and a mass of strangers, depends upon the habituated reinforcement of a particular chronotope. That’s why we know, immediately, that one slogan is the original, and that the other is a play on the original. It is an intertextual moment designed for an audience that will recognize the temporal relationship between the two slogans *and* the spatiotemporal dynamics that link a mass of Austinites together in a moment of recognition.

On an even more basic level, we might also consider the ways that rhetors throughout history have used imperative statements to speak to wider publics.

Though an imperative statement such as “Keep Austin Weird” is immediately recognizable to us as the political sentiment of an individual *and* the political sentiment of a collective, this commonsense understanding of its addressivity is the result of a complex history of rhetorical investment. We are enmeshed within an ecological infrastructure that makes a “Go Green” bumper sticker perfectly intelligible. We know that the car itself isn’t addressing us, telling us to live more sustainable lives. And we know, too, that this message doesn’t come directly from the driver of the car. It comes from a distributed web of rhetors who speak as individuals but also as representatives of a collective. It is a chronotope that makes sense to us. Examining the history of this chronotope might require us to investigate the long history of imperative statements that have appeared in varied media: protest signs, campaign buttons, and political graffiti, for example.

This attention to the role of varied media points to another benefit of the infrastructural model of the public sphere. An infrastructural model opens space to consider the ways that rhetors invest in the infrastructure of the public sphere through the use of material technologies. Though Edbauer describes the circulation of the slogan “Keep Austin Weird” throughout the city of Austin as a “viral” process, I believe that the use of this metaphor risks reinforcing the idea that the slogan spread on its own, in the way that an actual contagion does. In actuality, it didn’t. Unlike a virus, “Keep Austin Weird” didn’t linger on doorknobs, waiting for a host. And it wasn’t an airborne pathogen. The slogan spread throughout Austin in many different forms. It materialized as a bumper sticker, a posted flyer, a tote bag, a billboard, a print advertisement, and graffiti, to name just a few of its forms. To



consider the “viral spread” of the slogan in all of its particularity, therefore, we need to consider the ways that people used technologies to further its spread, shaping the chronotopes according to which texts, rhetors, and audiences came into relation with one another. We need to consider, in other words, how the slogan “Keep Austin Weird” became enmeshed in a web of people, social formations, texts, material environments, and technologies. Fundamentally, this is not a question about technologies themselves. It is a question about history, about social imaginaries, and about how rhetors and audiences work to negotiate the shared worlds that they find themselves in. As Collin Gifford Brooke reminds us, technologies are not deterministic; they only become meaningful within “ecologies of practice.”

During an era such as our own, in which new genres and technologies are rapidly shaping the dynamics of the public sphere, I believe that this infrastructural perspective is especially important. Studying the circulation of rhetoric in Austin, TX during the early 2000s might enable us to examine not only a particular contagion that circulated throughout the city but also the network of historically-distinct desires, instincts, habits, and practices that made this circulation possible. When we consider the ways that our everyday acts of rhetoric reinforce particular spatiotemporal dynamics, or chronotopes, it becomes clear that these acts do much more than extend the “reach” or “shelf life” of a message (Edbauer). These acts play a role in naturalizing invention practices, rhetor-audience relationships, and ultimately the forms of addressivity and uptake that support the existence of collective identities. Through these acts, we invest in an ecological infrastructure that makes future acts and future relations possible. Attending to the ways that we

invest in this infrastructure encourages us to reflect about how our everyday acts contribute to the naturalization of particular chronotopes. What kinds of acts, for example, have supported the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure that makes a bumper sticker intelligible? Or an angry missive launched in the comments section of a web page? Or millions of facebook users turning their profile pictures black in a mass protest? Our ability to participate reflectively in the transformation of the communication landscape depends upon our ability to understand the ways that our everyday acts of rhetoric contribute to this transformation.

As I have argued, an infrastructural perspective augments the ecology model that Edbauer articulates in her study of the slogan “Keep Austin Weird.” The ecology model’s narrow focus on the material circulation of the slogan elides the human investments—semiotic, material, and embodied—in the social imaginaries that make this circulation possible in particular times and places. As Nicholas J. Long and Henrietta L. Moore write

[We] need to reject the flattening impulse within a great deal of recent critical theory, which, in a self-styled attempt to ‘dethrone’ the figure of the ‘human subject’ [...] runs the danger of reducing human sociality to nothing more than the relationality between various beings or actants, or the transfer of affective energies between undifferentiated slabs of biological matter. (1)

Despite the posthuman nature of the ecologies that we inhabit, I believe—along with Long and Moore—that we should attend to the ways that relationality is continually “managed, directed, and operationalized” (13) by humans acting out their relations

with one another. The infrastructural model that I have begun to develop in this chapter aims to focus our attention on these kinds of investments.

**CHAPTER III**

**TESTING AN INFRASTRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE THROUGH  
AN EXAMINATION OF EMMA ELIZABETH WALKER'S SOCIAL HYGIENE  
LECTURES**

To test out the potential of the infrastructural model of the public sphere that I have begun to develop, this chapter uses this model to examine the rhetoric of Emma Elizabeth Walker, a doctor whose “social hygiene” lectures aimed to distribute knowledge about sex and bodies to a lay public of girls and young women in the early 1900s. By tracing the circulation of Dr. Walker’s “saving knowledge”—from its production at the confluence of multiple overlapping (and often conflicting) networks of stakeholders to its eventual circulation in more public contexts—this case study assesses the explanatory power of the concepts of *rhetorical investment* and *ecological infrastructure*. In addition, this case study assesses the utility of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *chronotope* for theorizing the ways that rhetors invest in the ecological infrastructures of the public sphere.

I have chosen to conduct a historical case study for two reasons. First, I believe that an adequate model of the public sphere should attune us to the distinct dynamics that animate its ecological infrastructures in particular times and places. By considering the ways that a rhetor invested in the ecological infrastructure of a particular place (New York City) during a particular historical moment (the Progressive Era), I believe that we can more fully assess the extent to which the

infrastructural model helps us historicize the dynamics of the public sphere. Second, by studying the historically-distinct dynamics of a public sphere very different from our own, I believe that we can work to denaturalize our “common sense” about how the public sphere works. Doing so might encourage us to understand the public sphere not through reference to particular archetypes of publicness but instead as an emergent phenomenon whose spatiotemporal dynamics are historically distinct. I believe that this is especially important for rhetors who wish to participate in the changing communication landscape that has emerged in conjunction with the use of networked technologies. As I have argued, today’s public sphere is shaped more than ever by the practices of rhetors themselves, who create—through their interactions with one another—novel worlds that persist and evolve, laying the groundwork for future deliberation and collective action. By understanding the complex processes that have shaped these spatiotemporal worlds that we inhabit, I believe that we can participate more reflectively in the transformation of the public sphere throughout our writing lives.

By testing this infrastructural model, I demonstrate its value for studying rhetorical practice in the public sphere. Once again, I use the term *ecological infrastructure* to refer to the durable yet evolving, material yet imagined, and human yet posthuman relational dynamics of the contexts that public rhetors inhabit. These infrastructures are frameworks within which rhetors do the work that they do. In this dissertation, I focus specifically on the ways that rhetors work to materialize spatiotemporal worlds within the ecological infrastructures that they inhabit. I argue that situating public acts of rhetoric within larger ecological infrastructures

encourages us to focus on the ways that rhetors participate—intentionally or not—in the transformation of the public sphere. However, this case study also reveals a limitation of the infrastructural model that I have begun to develop. As I demonstrate, an infrastructural model of the public sphere doesn't fully attune us to the ways that rhetors repurpose the spatiotemporal dynamics of past rhetorical situations for use in new situations. In order to address this limitation, I suggest at the end of this chapter that we might draw upon Paul Prior and Julie Hengst's concept of *semiotic remediation*, a concept that helps us better account for the ways that rhetors redeploy the resources already circulating within the ecologies that they inhabit.

My effort to test and revise an infrastructural model of the public sphere centers on an analysis of the public lectures of Emma Elizabeth Walker. I begin with a brief discussion of the historical context within which these lectures were delivered. I then focus on a tension apparent in these lectures—a tension between what I term a “knowledge liberation” chronotope and a “domestic instruction” chronotope. To investigate the ways that these seemingly paradoxical chronotopes were manifested through a single rhetor's acts, I investigate the ecological infrastructure within which Walker lectured. A key part of this infrastructure was the network of medical professionals and social reformers who constituted the social hygiene movement, a transnational movement composed of diverse factions and communication channels. I demonstrate that this far-flung network of people, technologies, discourses, texts, and environments “invested”—without conscious coordination—in the building and maintenance of an ecological infrastructure.

Lastly, I consider the extent to which Walker's public lectures contributed to the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure within which she was enmeshed. Due to the limitations of my archival research, my study does not make conclusions about how Walker's lectures altered this infrastructure. Instead, this chapter ends by speculating about how the mother-daughter chronotope that Walker deployed may have reinforced spatiotemporal orientations that delimited the ways that actors could be positioned in relation to one another, how they could act in response to one another, the tenor of their interactions, the public/private nature of their positioning in material space, and how their interactions would interface (or not) with the wider ecology that we call the public sphere.

### **The "Knowledge Liberation" Chronotope and the "Domestic Instruction"**

#### **Chronotope in the Public Lectures of Emma Elizabeth Walker**

Dr. Emma Elizabeth Walker worked within an ecological infrastructure shaped by the "social hygiene" movement. Though it had its roots in the late nineteenth century, the social hygiene movement's defining moment came in 1902, when a congress composed of medical professionals from around the world convened in Brussels to consider strategies for the prevention of venereal disease. Concerned that questions of purity had not been dealt with adequately, the Brussels congress declared that "the whole question should be studied anew from a broader standpoint, and with special reference to the social conditions involved in the causation of these diseases" ("Social Purity"). This prescription was the inspiration behind the establishment of a worldwide network of Societies of Social and Moral Prophylaxis, including a US branch founded in New York City where Dr. Emma

Elizabeth Walker—the subject of this study—began working as a lecturer (“Social Purity”).<sup>6</sup>

Walker soon found herself enmeshed within an infrastructure that was growing and changing in response to an emerging sexual health crisis. At the turn of the century, didactic lectures about abstinence and purity had failed. Social hygienists had begun calling for new methods to reach populations of young women who, more and more, seemed beyond the guiding influence of their families. From the middle-class “New Woman” to the parentless immigrant, a young woman in New York City was more likely to live alone than in previous generations, and was tied more and more to the public arena, where she might engage in heterosocial leisure rituals that tested the sexual mores of the era. Illicit, semi-public sexual practices of “petting” and “treating” blurred the boundaries between work and leisure, and the issue of prostitution, once considered an inevitable feature of every American city, was becoming a hotly debated public issue (Peiss 165-185).

It was within this cultural context that Walker emphasized the urgent need to present information “scientifically, definitely, plainly, and wholesomely.” Her lectures were emblematic of an ongoing struggle to provide accurate information about sex and bodies to the public. As Walker lamented in an address to a meeting of mothers, a “conspiracy of silence” had made important health information inaccessible to those who needed it. Millions of dollars were spent on “defectives”—children affected by venereal disease—while no money at all was set aside for “the

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<sup>6</sup> This archival case study is based upon lectures and lecture notes from the Emma Elizabeth Walker papers, held in Smith College’s Sophia Smith Collection. Among these is a lecture addressed to social hygienists that discusses strategies for educating young women.



spread of saving knowledge.” The American Public Health Association agreed with this sentiment, announcing that a primary goal should be to surmount “the hysteria and lack of balance which has too often characterized earlier interest in this problem” (“The Social Hygiene Movement,” 1157). Walker believed that young women were especially vulnerable to the ravages of venereal disease, and that the most effective way to protect the most vulnerable members of society was to break taboos surrounding the discussion of disease transmission. In one of her lectures to other social hygienists she lamented the public’s unwillingness to tolerate open discussion of sexual health:

The most formidable obstacle that we workers have to conquer is the deep-rooted prejudice against any discussion of this subject in many of the otherwise most enlightened and most advanced part of the community. This barrier although gradually being broken down is still high enough to call for vigorous effort ... The anatomy, physiology and hygiene of the sexual organs are only part of the anatomy physiology and hygiene of the organs in general

Walker’s lectures reinforced a common chronotope related to the flow of information, what I term a “knowledge liberation” chronotope. Here, I use the term *chronotope* to refer to a trope whose particular spatiotemporal dynamics recur across contexts. By deploying the recurring trope of “knowledge liberation,” Walker worked to materialize a particular kind of spatiotemporal world. As I discussed in the previous chapter, I use the term *spatiotemporal world* to refer to a simultaneously material and “imagined” space in which people become relational with one another according to particular spatiotemporal tropes, or chronotopes. A spatiotemporal world, in other words, is an invoked world, shaped by the practices of rhetors, in which *time and space work in particular ways*. What kind of “world,” we might ask, did Walker’s “knowledge liberation” chronotope work to realize? In

this spatiotemporal world, young women in New York City were “the public,” a body of citizens that lacked the information needed to make choices about their own health. The medical community, in contrast, was a privileged circle of experts with the power to free this “saving knowledge” from a public sphere suffocated by the imposition of unnatural Puritan mores. Walker invoked a “world” in which the flow of information was blocked by a “barrier” that needed to be broken down. In keeping with this belief that knowledge should flow freely throughout the public sphere, two of her lectures from this period closed with a quotation from Professor Max Mueller: “All truth is safe, and nothing else is safe, and he who keeps back the truth or withholds it as a matter of expediency is either a coward, a criminal, or both.”

By deploying a “knowledge liberation” chronotope, Walker positioned herself in relation to her listeners, and positioned her listeners in relation to one another, in the process invoking a particular kind of spatiotemporal world. The world that Walker attempted to invoke was one in which social hygienists like herself played roles not unlike religious missionaries; in the invoked world that Walker worked to materialize, social hygienists were a distributed movement that sought to break down, through “vigorous effort,” a “barrier” that had for centuries kept “saving knowledge” from the people who needed it. Spatially, this chronotope encouraged the continued spread of a particular kind of awakening throughout the public sphere. It suggested that once the barrier had been broken down, information would flow freely, reaching all corners of the globe. Temporally, this chronotope positioned young women as either “saved” or in need of saving. Working to invoke a

world divided into “before” and “after,” social hygienists worked urgently to break down the “barrier” that separated young women from the knowledge that they needed, and in turn to usher in a new era. Ultimately, the “knowledge liberation” chronotope worked to materialize a world in which social hygienists and their audiences played the roles of missionary and convert. A social hygienist, working as a representative of a larger network, would crisscross the land, transforming all who she came into contact with through the spread of a particular kind of “saving knowledge.”

Though Walker deployed this “knowledge liberation” chronotope on a number of occasions, her lectures reveal an interesting tension. On the one hand, her repetition of this “knowledge liberation” chronotope worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world in which authoritative knowledge was a currency unjustly hoarded by a select few, and was therefore in need of more *public* circulation. On the other hand, her lectures worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world rooted in the private discourse of mothers and daughters—what I term a “domestic instruction” chronotope. This chronotope invoked an idealized domestic scene of a mother and daughter engaged in private discussion about life struggles.

In her notes for a lecture later delivered to the Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis, for example, Walker wrote

In talks to girls order and an harmonius atmosphere must exist before any work can be accomplished. Occasionally the nicest tact is necessary for the attainment of suitable conditions. In general the case is like that between mother and child. The girl, as a rule, interprets at once the lecturer’s attitude and personality. If she recognizes perfect sincerity with entire lack of condescension and sentimentalism; if she sees that the lecturer is there with a message as from one member of the family to another, then the first battle is won, and mutual confidence is established—the foundation stone of the

entire structure. The keynote to successful work with girls seems to be deep sympathy with them in their lives as a whole and in detail ... in other words modeling the isolated lecture as far as may be after the ideal method of a mother with her child. The subject in this way being made only a part of the whole and by frank discussion being robbed of its mysticism is opened up to the light of day. As a settlement worker wrote after one of these talks, "The thing that impressed them most seemed to me to be that it could be talked about—that it wasn't a thing to hide and be ashamed of" ... Time for general discussion after the lecture is always allowed, and questions that have been latent for many years are freely asked and answered. Not infrequently girls stay for an individual interview. These girls, many of them living in crowded tenements are warned against the commonest wiles and arguments employed for their downfall. Emphasis is always placed on the idleness and harmfulness of discussions among the girls themselves.

In sum, Walker's lectures articulated a distinctly modern belief that information should circulate freely in the public sphere. But this belief seems to have been counterbalanced by her paradoxical embrace of a spatiotemporal trope, or chronotope, that worked to materialize a world in which knowledge about sex and bodies would only circulate in very limited ways—in face-to-face encounters between experts and non-experts that mimicked the roles of the domestic sphere. Instead of working to liberate knowledge so that it could circulate freely, Walker's deployment of this "domestic instruction" chronotope worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world in which information about sexual health would only circulate from expert to audience. In contrast to the "knowledge liberation" chronotope, the "domestic instruction" chronotope positioned rhetor and audience in relation to one another within a semi-private spatiotemporal world that would mimic the dynamics of an idealized middle-class home. In other words, "latent" questions would find expression not through *public* discussion but instead through question and answer sessions with a medical professional acting as a mother figure. According to this "domestic instruction" chronotope, widespread discussion of controversial medical

knowledge with peers was idle and harmful. In contrast, lectures whose dynamics mimicked those of a domestic space would enable young women to engage in discussion of controversial information while adhering to norms of modesty, purity, and domesticity. In this invoked “world,” young women and medical professionals would engage in an ongoing dialogue characterized by practices of support and guidance.

Explaining this model of sex education to other medical professionals and social reformers, Walker articulated an “atmospheric” approach to her role as a mother figure. According to this approach, a social worker, teacher, school administrator, settlement worker, clubwoman, or doctor might take on the role of “the foster father and mother” (Peiss 179) for young urban women. To support the model that she advocated, Walker quoted Patterson Du Bois’s insight that education should be “less a matter of direct teaching and preaching than atmospheric influence—example, suggestion, pure speech, gentle manner, sweet temper, strong handling, firm stepping in virtue.” Quoting philosopher William James, Walker explained that an important part of education is to foster virtuous habits, and in so doing to “make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.”

### **Studying Emma Elizabeth Walker’s Lectures through the Use of an Infrastructural Model**

One way to analyze Dr. Walker’s mother-daughter chronotope is to understand it as a strategic choice. We can imagine, in other words, that Walker made a calculated decision to position herself as a mother figure because it was the most efficient way to smuggle controversial medical knowledge into a prudish,

regressive public sphere. This pragmatic understanding of social hygiene rhetoric has been pursued by other scholars. Robin Jensen, for example, suggests that social hygienists of the early 1900s strategically deployed an “ambiguous discourse” in order to achieve their aims without censure. One only has to consider the name of the movement itself—“social hygiene” was a euphemism designed to avoid censure—to understand the value of strategic language choices (Jensen 18). But though Walker’s mother-daughter chronotope was certainly a “means to an end,” I don’t believe that theorizing this chronotope as a strategic tool should be the only way to make sense of its consequentiality in the public sphere.

Understood through an infrastructural model of the public sphere, Walker’s lectures can be understood not only as intentional acts but also as acts shaped by the ecological infrastructure within which they were delivered. From obscenity laws to pulp novels to purity movements to medical conferences, myriad “investors” built and maintained this ecological infrastructure, creating a field of possibility within which certain chronotopes could be deployed over others, and in which certain kinds of spatiotemporal worlds could, in turn, be materialized. Walker’s attempts to disseminate information throughout New York City were, in other words, not just investments in the circulation of information. They were also investments in the kind of public sphere that others would inhabit. By materializing spatiotemporal worlds that brought people into particular kinds of interrelations with one another, Walker reinforced relational dynamics that undoubtedly outlasted her own rhetorical situation. In doing so, she unwittingly contributed to the continual transformation of the infrastructure within which she worked, making it possible

for others to deploy certain chronotopes, and to materialize worlds with particular spatiotemporal dynamics.

It is no easy task to draw conclusions about how this complex and dispersed ecological infrastructure might have shaped Walker's ability to build a spatiotemporal world that her audiences could inhabit. In attempting to draw conclusions about the processes that shaped this infrastructure, we run up against the limitations of our conceptual tools, which more often than not fail to capture the ecological character of the rhetorical situation. Philip Ball, discussing the challenge of articulating the causal dynamics of complex systems using our narrative instincts, hints at this limitation. He writes, "[A] complex system [is] one in which many agents interact with one another simultaneously ... [I]t might be quite wrong to tell such a story in terms of *this* small-scale action leading to *that* large-scale effect."

Despite the challenge that Ball refers to, I believe that it is worth trying to tell ecological stories. And I believe that an infrastructural model of the public sphere can help us do so. Toward the goal of theorizing Emma Walker's simultaneous deployment of a "knowledge liberation" chronotope and a "domestic instruction" chronotope, this case study applies an infrastructural model of the public sphere to the study of her lectures. I believe that this infrastructural model can help us investigate the ways that the constituent parts of an ecological infrastructure contributed to its continual transformation. Ultimately, this can help us investigate how Walker was supported, hindered, blocked, encouraged, inspired, rewarded, and socialized by the infrastructure within which she was enmeshed, and ultimately how these "investments" shaped the nature of her rhetorical acts. In addition, I

believe that an infrastructural model can help us consider the ways that Walker's mother-daughter chronotope became *consequential* within the ecological infrastructure of New York City in the early 1900s. In other words, an infrastructural model can help us investigate the ways that Walker's rhetorical acts contributed to the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure within which she worked.

Of course, we cannot catalogue every part of this vast infrastructure. But by investigating the ways that it was built and maintained, we can begin to draw conclusions about how it created the conditions for Walker's mother-daughter chronotope. In an attempt to shed light on Walker's simultaneous deployment of a "knowledge liberation" chronotope and a "domestic instruction" chronotope, I have chosen to focus my investigation on three aspects of this ecological infrastructure. Taken together, these investigations work to illuminate the ways that myriad constituents invested in the building and maintenance of an ecological infrastructure, ultimately shaping the ways that Walker would address audiences of young women through her public lectures. The three aspects of this infrastructure that I focus on are 1) the competing factions of the social hygiene movement, 2) the unauthorized circulation channels of New York City, and 3) the "Cult of True Womanhood."

### **The Competing Factions of the Social Hygiene Movement**

In the November 1913 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, an editorial about the future of social hygiene painted a daunting picture of the task ahead of the movement. To survive, it would need to "weld together a large number



of diversified and, even, antagonistic elements” (1155). The movement included those who believed that moral education was the only path to righteousness, those who advocated direct clinical work with victims of venereal disease, those who saw social hygiene as the public arm of a burgeoning eugenics movement, those who were working to eradicate red-light districts, those who pushed for the ethical regulation of prostitution, and those who believed that only domestic instruction would have any effect at all. The social hygiene movement was the site of uneasy alliances between the last vestiges of the social purity movement and more scientifically-minded reformers, among them eugenicists (Pivar). One can see, then, how the production and circulation of knowledge about sexual health was bound, under the umbrella of “social hygiene,” to a multitude of campaigns for moral, domestic, urban, and racial purity.

Each of these campaigns was animated by a spatiotemporal trope—or *chronotope*—that articulated particular kinds of relationships between the body, the nation, the medical community, the church, the family, and the police. In many cases, the chronotopes reinforced by these factions of the social hygiene movement proved incompatible with one another. F.N. Seerly, in a speech titled “Suggested Methods for Giving Instruction in Sexual Hygiene,” articulated a particular temporal relationship between sex education and “pure character.” He asserted that children should be instructed about sexual reproduction as early as possible and as scientifically as possible. The efforts of teachers, he argued, often occurred “after it [was] too late” (5). “The important thing to be remembered,” he said, “is that you are not discussing an impure act, and that none of the organs need to be avoided,

when the mind is ready to know about them ... [T]he instruction needs to be as open and clear as about any other set of organs, and indeed might be taught in connection with others so they would not command special attention at that particular time” (7). Seerly’s spatiotemporal understanding of the project of sex education reinforced a vision of the world according to which scientific information should be in the hands of children as early as possible, and should be delivered via a particular site: the home. According to Seerly, the social hygiene movement’s attempts to solve an urban epidemic of disease and vice depended upon its ability to activate a network of domestic spaces.

This chronotope, however, worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world that was in conflict with the spatiotemporal world reinforced by those who believed that young children should remain ignorant of the details of sexual reproduction. As Jensen writes, the public sphere at the turn of the century was not a place where sexuality was discussed openly. “Citizens’ sexual silence,” she writes, “was often grounded in a belief that children, especially girls and young women, were naturally innocent and modest. The young were essentially viewed as blank slates who became interested in sex only when exposed to outside influences. Seen in this light, keeping young people uninformed about sex was also keeping them safe from ‘self-harms’ such as masturbation and sexual experimentation” (4). This conceptualization of a child as a blank slate worked to materialize a very different spatiotemporal world than the social hygiene project that Seerly advocated. It suggested that the main goal of any project of sexual education would be to preserve—as long as possible—a child’s endangered state of innocence. Within this

spatiotemporal world, early sex education was a corrupting influence that society needed to protect children from. Hence, this chronotope worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world within which sexual education would happen in a more decentralized way, outside of the home, if at all.

Because the social hygiene project worked to materialize very different spatiotemporal worlds, its diverging branches needed to compete to court the favor (and funding) of elected officials, lawmakers, and the public. In the early 1900s, when Walker delivered her first public lectures, she was already enmeshed within a complex network of health advocates, institutions, community organizations, and medical societies. She was a member of the American Medical Association, the New York Academy of Medicine, the Women's Medical Society of New York State, the Medical Society of the County of New York, the Medical Society of the State of New York, and the Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis. She was a lecturer for the City of New York's Department of Education, and later—during WWI—an employee of the Y.W.C.A.'s War Work Council. Throughout her career, interconnected networks of stakeholders provided Dr. Walker with invitations to lecture, to publish, to collaborate, and to contribute to discussions about the future of social hygiene initiatives.

We can see, in Walker's long history of involvement with these diverse organizations and institutions, her ongoing efforts to navigate the factional battles of the social hygiene movement. As these seemingly incompatible factions exerted influence on the wider social hygiene movement, they worked to position networks of people, texts, and environments in relation to one another in varied ways. In

other words, they shaped the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. Working within this infrastructure, Walker found herself enmeshed within a material and imagined public sphere that offered certain possibilities and made other possibilities impossible. The mother-daughter chronotope proved felicitous within this infrastructure. Rather than forcing her to stake out a position about one of the most controversial aspects of sex education—the age at which it should take place—Walker’s mother-figure persona ensured that she would stay in the good graces of the seemingly incompatible factions of the movement. This chronotope, in other words, contributed to a project of consolidating and reconciling these factions through the building of a spatiotemporal world that would embody many of their competing visions of the public sphere. According to the mother-daughter “world” that Walker worked to materialize, it was the duty of medical experts to authoritatively dispel myths that had previously circulated *and* to respond to “latent” questions before they became unhealthy curiosities. Like an idealized mother figure, Walker aimed to establish an ongoing, mutual relationship with her listeners. And like an idealized mother figure, Walker worked to establish this relationship in a pseudo-private space in which all parties could expect confidentiality and trust. This mother figure role was a role that she could adopt, seemingly without controversy, whether she was speaking to elementary school-aged girls or adult women.

As I have discussed, the infrastructure of New York City was shaped through ecological processes. As we’ve just seen, a number of local stakeholders invested directly in Walker’s work. However, an infrastructural model encourages us to

consider the ways that the city's ecological infrastructure was also shaped by constituents who never had any direct contact with Walker herself. The ecological nature of this infrastructure is apparent in the social hygiene movement's origins—in particular, in the minefield of controversies and factional interests that characterized its early years. As Jeffrey P. Moran writes, the movement began when “medical experts joined with moralists and professional educators” in response to “a growing sense of national moral crisis” (26). Reaching a shared understanding of this moral crisis, however, depended upon the movement's ability to agree about the spatiotemporal world within which the city's bodies, environments, texts, and pathogens interacted across time and space. The social hygiene movement never reached a shared understanding of this kind. During its short life, the movement continually attempted to cobble together a unified project through temporary alliances and careful compromises. The ecological infrastructure that emerged was a minefield of controversies, both legal and social. Varied societies, organizations, and associations invested, in very material ways, in projects that made certain kinds of relations possible and other kinds of relations impossible. They invested in delimiting the ways that young women would be positioned in relation to medical experts, in relation to one another, and in relation to the wider public sphere. In other words, the factions of the social hygiene movement invested in the building of particular kinds of spatiotemporal worlds, and in the process shaped the relations of the public sphere, resulting in the development of a certain kind of infrastructure that rhetors would operate within.

By invoking a “world” in which sex education could be both preventative and reparative, Walker’s mother-daughter chronotope operated within the constraints of an already-established infrastructure. This chronotope enabled her to mediate between the seemingly incompatible factions of the social hygiene movement, which had shaped the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere in complex ways. At the same time, this chronotope played a role in the ongoing transformation of this ecological infrastructure. By working to materialize a particular kind of spatiotemporal world, Walker may have positioned people in relation to one another in ways that outlasted the rhetorical situation at hand, resulting in “infrastructural” changes to the public sphere itself.

However, tracing Walker’s attempts to navigate this factional moment in sex education only helps us tell part of the story. To understand the relationship between Walker’s lectures and the wider ecological infrastructure within which she operated, I argue that we need to situate her lectures in relation to the texts and rhetoric that circulated around her. By doing so, we can investigate the ways that Walker’s rhetorical acts were shaped by an already-existing ecology of texts and rhetoric that worked in concert with, and in conflict with, her own lectures. To this end, I now turn to an investigation of the unauthorized circulation channels of New York City.

### **The Unauthorized Circulation Channels of New York City**

One justification that social hygienists provided for early sex education was that it was preferable to the kind of instruction that girls and young women would receive later, in the wider world. Jeffrey Moran, discussing the forms of “informal

sex education” that were available in New York City at the time, writes, “The commercialized forces of sex, in particular—prostitutes, dance hall operators, distributors of obscene literature—all tried to make a profit by inciting the youth’s innate sexual impulses to a higher pitch. Confined as they were to red-light districts, these businesses had become in effect a densely packed advertisement for vice” (44). Hence, Walker and other social hygienists contended not only with the conflicting ideologies of their era but also with the management of a distributed material ecology of texts, bodies, images, and circulating messages. In a lecture delivered to the Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis, Walker quoted social hygienist Prince Morrow to warn her listeners that in the absence of “the right information” and “giving information rightly,” young women would “gather knowledge in a haphazard way, from companions, books, and in other ways.” Similarly, in a 1908 lecture to the American Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis, F.N. Seerly spoke of how the “instruction of the street” poisons minds with “stories which are told in shops, on the streets, the pictures on the bill-boards, in newspapers, or sold by thought-to-be reputable newsdealers, books and pamphlets sold or given away, some of them advertisements of museums or quack doctors” (*Transactions* 5). Paying attention to these street-level circulation channels encourages us to recognize that the social hygiene movement’s efforts to build and maintain an ecological infrastructure were necessarily efforts to occlude alternative ecological infrastructures.

Walker, however, wasn’t the only enemy of this “instruction of the street.” The chief reason that we lack a robust material record of this textual ecology is

because much of the material circulating through it was illegal to sell and possess after the passage of the Comstock Law in 1873. The work of anti-obscenity crusader Anthony Comstock, the Comstock Law was used to prosecute more than 3,800 people, disproportionately from working class and immigrant backgrounds, for the selling and possession of pornography, contraceptives, literature about sex, and even medical tracts (Jensen, 2010). The law stated that no one could sell or possess

an obscene book, pamphlet, paper, writing, advertisement, circular, print, picture, drawing or other representation, figure, or image on or of paper or other material, or any cast instrument, or other article of an immoral nature, or any drug or medicine, or any article, whatever, for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion, or shall advertise the same for sale, or shall write or print, or cause to be written or printed, any card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind, stating when, where, how, or of whom, or by what means, any of the articles in this section ... can be purchased or obtained, or shall manufacture, draw, or print, or in any wise make any of such articles. (Tone 141)

Comstock, like many others of his era, reinforced a vision of the public sphere in which children were innocents in need of protection. He wrote that when children are exposed to sexual influences, “Imagination is defiled and perverted; thoughts are corrupted; the conscience is seared, the heart is hardened, and the soul damned” (Moran 39). This spatiotemporal understanding of the circulation of sexual content reinforced a belief in its power as a corrupting agent. Comstock aimed to suppress “vice” whenever and wherever it appeared. Even the work of social hygienists came under attack. In 1913, circulars based on the classroom lectures of social hygienists in Chicago were ruled obscene by the U.S. attorney (Moran 53). In response, some social hygienists turned to the use of stereoscopic slides, a new medium that engaged audiences in visceral ways (some viewers were said to have fainted in their seats) without running afoul of the Comstock Law.



On one hand, it would be quite right to argue that the Comstock Law operated as a very direct constraint on Dr. Walker, limiting her ability to publish and circulate material about sex and bodies. There is no doubt that the law profoundly affected the ways that texts circulated in the century that followed its passage. But focusing solely on how the Comstock Law *directly* constrained Dr. Walker obscures the fact that this law had already profoundly shaped the ecological infrastructure within which she worked.

An infrastructural model of the public sphere encourages us to investigate how myriad “investors” shaped this infrastructure over time, and to investigate how this infrastructure became a field of possibility within which Walker operated. The basement print shop on Warren street where Anthony Comstock began his crusade against vice was part of the same ecological infrastructure as stereoscopic slides of venereal disease, which were part of the same infrastructure as the circulation channels through which pamphlets and pulp novels traveled, which were part of the same infrastructure as the “social imaginaries” according to which strangers understood their relations to one another. According to an infrastructural model, these dispersed phenomena participated in the continual realignment of bodies, texts, objects, and environments in relation to one another, leaving behind an ecological infrastructure that would become the ground upon which rhetors would work. Hence, tracing direct contact between rhetors and audiences is not the only means of studying the ways that one rhetor affects the work of other rhetors. In addition, we can study the ways that the varied constituents of the public sphere

invest in the building and maintenance of the larger ecological infrastructure within which they are enmeshed.

The Comstock Law, for example, was created with a practical aim in mind—the suppression of “corrupting” texts. But its spatiotemporal effects were no less impactful. Over more than a century, the law worked to materialize a particular spatiotemporal orientation toward sexually explicit printed works—a chronotope—that shaped the ways that people would produce, distribute, exchange, and consume texts in public and private spaces. Working within this ecological infrastructure, it is no surprise that Walker conducted her lectures about social hygiene through the medium of speech. Though Walker was a widely published author, her published work focused exclusively on non-controversial subjects such as beauty, hair care, and bathing. Without knowing it, Comstock had “invested” in this kind of rhetorical work.

But he wasn’t the only investor. We can consider, as well, how people enmeshed within the unauthorized circulation channels of New York City invested in Walker’s rhetorical work. The distribution of pulp novels, birth control guides, pornography, and other texts considered obscene created a thriving textual “underground.” Walker knew that her rhetoric would need to cut through the noise of the “haphazard” circulation channels of New York City, which social hygienists believed had monopolized the curiosity of New Yorkers for too long. It is no surprise, then, that her lectures prioritized the establishment of an exclusive circulation channel for the dissemination of authoritative knowledge. As we saw earlier in the chapter, Walker wrote that she didn’t want girls to share information

with one another. In other words, Walker's mother-daughter chronotope was particularly suited to enact the building and maintenance of this ecological infrastructure in a particular time and place. By invoking a domestic "scene" within the public space of a lecture hall, Walker's mother-daughter chronotope operated according to the spatiotemporal constraints and possibilities offered by the wider ecological infrastructure within which she was enmeshed. Working within this ecological infrastructure, Walker adopted a "mother figure" persona that enabled her to materialize an exclusive circulation channel through which authoritative scientific knowledge would travel. As a result, her lectures would compete directly with the "instruction of the street" that Walker and many social hygienists saw as a threat to public morality. In essence, the "mother" and "daughter" figures would establish an exclusive channel of circulation, one that no one else would ever access, and discuss things that might be considered unacceptable or embarrassing in other contexts. The work of an expert, according to this chronotope, was to authoritatively dispel myths perpetuated by competing information sources. A circulation channel of this kind would support a young woman in her attempts to validate or invalidate contradictory knowledge acquired in multiple contexts, setting the stage for a "scene" that could recur indefinitely.

Seen in this light, Emma Walker's mother-daughter chronotope can be understood as a vehicle for the efficient dissemination of information. But this chronotope can also be understood as a recurring trope that changed the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere in lasting ways. By taking on the persona of a "foster father and mother" (Peiss 179) for young women whose family structures

conflicted with the domestic ideals that she championed, Walker worked to standardize an exclusive channel through which authoritative scientific knowledge would travel. In the process, she worked to change the ways that her listeners would be positioned in relation to her, in relation to the medical community, and in relation to one another. In other words, she contributed to changes in the public sphere.

In the following section, I consider the extent to which the spatiotemporal dynamics of Walker's mother-daughter chronotope proved felicitous with a "cult of true womanhood" that structured the relations between women, children, and the nation at the turn of the century.

### **The Cult of True Womanhood**

The "world" that Walker materialized through the use of a mother-daughter chronotope was one that called to mind the dynamics of a domestic space. Walker's mother-daughter chronotope positioned participants in hierarchical relationships based on differing levels of expert knowledge. Participants would always be face-to-face, together in a semi-private setting, bound to each other in mutual confidence. According to the spatiotemporal dynamics of this "world," a daughter would hold latent questions about sex and the body. Approached by her mother, she would enter into an open-ended process of asking and answering through which competing versions of the truth would be evaluated in light of a parent's authoritative knowledge.

Though this chronotope may have originated in a domestic context, Walker's deployment of it was most likely rooted in a tradition of "maternal rhetoric" that

had been popularized by women in various fields. Cynthia Stavrianos writes, for example, about the ways that suffragists used maternal frames to successfully pursue their controversial aims. As she writes, “A quantitative event analysis of suffrage campaigns in twenty-nine states performed by sociologist Holly McCammon and her co-authors (2001) persuasively documents that women’s use of separate spheres rhetoric, emphasizing the vote as a necessary tool for mothers to protect their children and their homes, was significantly positively correlated with the passage of state level suffrage measures” (18). In addition, Stavrianos discusses the ways that women used “less threatening” maternal frames to fight for labor reforms that had been considered unpalatable when pursued through other means.

This “maternal rhetoric,” of course, depended upon a belief that women in public life represented the concerns of a “separate sphere”—the domestic sphere. As representatives of this sphere, they were seen as protectors of an idealized nation and white race. Often termed a “cult of true womanhood,” this nineteenth century worldview reinforced the idea that women—and especially mothers—were the rock upon which society rested. As Barbara Welter writes

In a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues that made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as the enemy of God, of civilization, and of the Republic. (1)

This nineteenth century philosophy was typified in the philosophy of Reverend Jonathan F. Stearns, whose lecture entitled “Female Influence, and the True Christian Mode of Its Exercise: A Discourse” aimed to impress upon his listeners an

understanding of the important role that mothers play in preserving the beauty of society at large:

On you, ladies, depends, in a most important degree, the destiny of our country ... Yours is to determine, whether the beautiful order of society, a system of many members in one body ... shall continue as it has been, to be the source of blessings to the world; or whether, despising all forms and distinctions, all boundaries and rules, society shall break up and become a chaos of disjointed and unsightly elements. (23)

Stearns, like many who adhered to the cult of true womanhood, believed that the role of the mother was to handle the more “obscure” and “unseen” task of domestic instruction: “The mother who gave her country a Washington, accomplished more for the world than many heroes and statesmen, and eloquent orators ... Your influence, be assured, is not less because it is obscure. The broad river takes its waters from the little rills that supply it” (21).

This “cult of true womanhood” was more than an ideology about the role of women. It was also a material ecology. Through the circulation of “women’s magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature” (Welter), women were positioned in relation to their children, their husbands, and one another, serving symbolically as the embodiment of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

By the time that Walker was lecturing in New York City, however, the nation was changing. These changes were especially apparent in New York City. Young women were moving to the city in large numbers and finding themselves suddenly unmoored from the traditional family structures that the nation’s mythology had depended upon (Pivar, 2002). Rates of venereal disease were rising. When it came to crafting a strategy to address these challenges, the varied factions of the social hygiene movement could not agree on a way forward. Many social workers,

teachers, school administrators, settlement workers, clubwomen, and doctors valued the private, personalized approach to education that earlier purity advocates had promoted. The cult of true womanhood, a philosophy supported by nearly a century of literary, religious, and political amplification, offered a potent cultural model for this kind of national project, encouraging a number of social hygienists to argue, as Seerly did, that the home should serve as “the center of our educational equipment” (5). The problem, according to many social hygienists, was that mass migration to cities had separated young women from the domestic spaces where this ongoing process of socialization could take place. In addition, Walker pointed out in one of her lectures that the majority of mothers, “as we saw them here in New York,” were unfit to deliver instruction about sex and bodies (*Transactions* 33). New immigrants, if they came to the city with families at all, brought with them domestic cultures that many saw as incompatible with the cult of true womanhood, a philosophy that emphasized class-based norms of “civilized” modesty and purity.

Many in the social hygiene movement felt that even if mothers could instruct their daughters adequately, it was too late to rely solely on domestic instruction. The next generation had to receive the truth—by any means necessary—lest it fall prey to the ignorance of unfit family cultures or the “instruction of the street.” Facing this dilemma, social hygienists increasingly made rhetorical pleas for an embrace of a rational, scientific approach to educating the masses. In considering the public’s “innate sense of propriety,” for example, William Polk spoke about his admiration for an educational program that would consider the subject “as far as possible, from a purely scientific standpoint” (*Transactions* 2). Through appeals to

this “knowledge liberation” chronotope, social hygienists carved out a third way between the complete privacy of the domestic ideal and the “conspiracy of silence” that had characterized the Victorian era.

It was within this ecological infrastructure that Walker advocated her particular brand of motherly pedagogy, arguing in one of her lectures that “an ounce of mother is worth a pound of doctor” (Walker). By positioning herself as a metaphorical foster mother to the masses, and by positioning the listeners who she addressed as daughter figures, Walker was able to mediate between two conflicting visions of the public sphere. She was able to engage in domestic instruction. But she was able to do so publicly, addressing audiences of strangers. In other words, she was able to embody the role of the “true woman,” and to reinforce the relational dynamics of the “domestic instruction” chronotope through her interactions with young women in New York City.

At the same time, however, she was able to undertake a coordinated, centralized project of information dissemination with the support of the medical establishment and its authoritative body of scientific knowledge behind her. Again, the mother-daughter chronotope enabled Walker to have it both ways. During Walker’s era, a broad public health campaign focused on sex and reproduction would have conflicted with the relational dynamics that structured the ecological infrastructure of New York City in a particular time and place. The life of Margaret Sanger provides an illustrative case. Working strategically within the ecological infrastructure available to her, Sanger nonetheless faced opposition when attempting to materialize a spatiotemporal world that conflicted dramatically with



the cult of true womanhood that had dominated the public sphere during the previous century. Arrested for violating the Comstock Law, Sanger intentionally flouted social and legal restrictions by speaking publicly about matters of sexual health, and as a result was subject to “stigmatization, legal action, and social ostracism” (Jensen 34). Walker, on the other hand, found success as a lecturer, and was praised by many for her approach. Operating within the same ecological infrastructure, she worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world whose existence was supported by medical communities, educational institutions, and government organizations.

Having investigated how this ecological infrastructure delimited the nature of Walker’s rhetorical acts, I turn, now, to an analysis of the ways that her rhetorical acts *shaped* the infrastructure within which they were performed.

### **Emma Elizabeth Walker’s Investments in the Ecological Infrastructure of the Public Sphere**

As this chapter has demonstrated, Walker did much more than disseminate information to young women. The mother-daughter chronotope that she deployed worked to materialize a specific vision of how space and time might work in the public sphere. In addition to shaping the spatiotemporal world that she might inhabit with her audiences, Walker’s use of this chronotope contributed to the building of a wider ecological infrastructure. In other words, Walker *invested* in this infrastructure.

But because my research does not include a record of Walker’s interactions with audiences, a full accounting of the ways that her “investments” shaped the

public sphere is not possible. My analysis *does* consider the ecological infrastructure that Walker inhabited. And it *does* consider the ways that her deployment of a mother-daughter chronotope worked within this already-existing ecological infrastructure. However, I can only speculate about whether Walker's lectures successfully materialized the kind of spatiotemporal world that she worked to invoke. And I can only speculate about how her invocation of this spatiotemporal world shaped the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. In other words, this chapter discusses the ways that Walker's lectures worked to transform the public sphere. But it does not make claims about the ways that she *did* transform it.

As I have demonstrated, Walker's lectures reflected the complexity of the public sphere that she inhabited. These lectures were both public and private, both scientific and motherly, and both progressive and regressive. Applying an infrastructural model to Walker's lectures encourages us to consider how the many constituents of her ecological infrastructure—from young women to laws to circulating pamphlets to media technologies to immigration patterns to religious histories to organized communities of advocates and professionals—invested in the building and maintenance of the ecological infrastructure within which she delivered these lectures.

Applying the concept of rhetorical investment to this case, we can also consider how these lectures themselves worked to invest in the building and maintenance of this ecological infrastructure. Though Walker's rhetorical acts were very much *public* rhetorical acts, they worked to remake the public sphere in the ideal image of a private domestic space. And while Walker's mother-daughter

chronotope might have served an obvious purpose in a domestic context—its recurring spatiotemporal dynamics would have enabled mothers to share taboo information with their daughters through an ongoing, open-ended process of private discussion—its function in a public lecture hall, during an era characterized by divergent investments, merits critical analysis. What was the “scene” that Walker attempted to invoke through her public rhetorical acts? What kinds of relations did she attempt to materialize between herself and her audiences, and between the strangers that made up her audiences?

Firstly, her mother-daughter chronotope aimed to keep questions of sexual health confined to designated spaces. Despite the public nature of Walker’s lectures, her use of the medium of speech and her attempts to establish a circulation channel with her listeners that mimicked the interactions of a mother and daughter worked to invoke a spatiotemporal world in which information would not circulate in “haphazard” ways. Secondly, her deployment of this mother-daughter chronotope worked to standardize and centralize expertise at a moment when doctors, reformers, and educators from around the country were struggling to find approaches to the venereal disease epidemic that would prove both socially acceptable and effective. Walker, in other words, deployed a chronotope that served to mediate between conflicting visions of the public sphere.

Though Walker’s rhetorical acts were certainly intentional acts, I don’t believe that focusing solely on the intentionality of these acts can best illuminate how they became consequential in the public sphere. To understand how Walker’s deployment of a mother-daughter chronotope contributed to the transformation of

the public sphere, I have argued that we should consider the *infrastructural* nature of the work that she did. Firstly, an infrastructural model of the public sphere encourages us to consider how Walker contributed to the building and maintenance of an ecological infrastructure in ways that she could not have predicted. While Walker may have chosen to adopt a “mother figure” persona for purely practical reasons, an infrastructural model encourages us to consider the ways that this choice served to reinforce the dynamics of the ecology that she inhabited. For example, because Walker’s mother-daughter chronotope emphasized face-to-face interactions that left no trace of their existence, it would seem productive to investigate the extent to which this chronotope bolstered a public sphere in which the dissemination and possession of medical tracts was actively prosecuted. By ensuring that the dissemination of controversial knowledge would remain semi-private, Walker’s lectures contributed to the building and maintenance of a public sphere in which the public lacked a collective consciousness about issues of sexual health. These lectures worked, in some small way, to maintain a line between public and private that kept certain kinds of information out of wider circulation.

Secondly, an infrastructural model encourages us to consider the ways that Walker’s “investments” in the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere foreclosed alternative possibilities. For example, we might investigate the extent to which Walker’s mother-daughter chronotope encouraged women to seek expert knowledge rather than pooling collective knowledge. Through the deployment of this chronotope, Walker likely played a role in regulating the ways that knowledge would move between the technical sphere and the public sphere. She worked to

reinforce the social hygiene movement's authorized circulation channels at the expense of the contested, marginalized infrastructures of New York City. Embedded within a nationwide project that aimed to centralize and disseminate authoritative knowledge, Walker's "mother figure" persona served to reinforce her claim to expertise. But it also delimited the kinds of collective consciousness that her listeners might develop around issues of sexual health.

Through the use of an infrastructural model of the public sphere, in other words, we can see how the spatiotemporal dynamics that animated Walker's mother-daughter chronotope were particularly suited to enact infrastructural work in a time and place in which the future of these infrastructures was contested. Though the ecological infrastructure within which she worked only made it possible for her to successfully deploy chronotopes that aligned with the "investments" of the ecology within which she was enmeshed, she contributed to the building and maintenance of this infrastructure in ways that were consequential. These acts, in other words, laid the groundwork for others.

Taking a long view of Walker's place in history, we can see that her lectures were delivered during a transitional moment. The public sphere that she worked to materialize foreshadowed the project of sex education in the century to come, during which a scientific approach would prove to be both "recognizably modern and reassuringly traditional" (Moran 49). Within the semi-public space of the classroom, information about sexual health and reproduction was soon folded into the study of human biology and health. As a result, social hygiene became sex education. The "purifying sanctions of medicine and science" won the day (Moran

47). As Moran writes, “Leaders ... hoped that grounding sex education in the schools would help them avoid the danger of *too* much publicity for the delicate subject” (38). In addition, he notes that the relative privacy of the classroom enabled sex educators to mostly avoid the repressive legal challenges that social hygienists had faced (38). Hence, while Walker’s motherly approach to sex education was not widely adopted, I believe that further research would reveal that it played a consequential role in shaping the public sphere during the century that followed.

### **Augmenting the Infrastructural Model of the Public Sphere with Paul Prior and Julie Hengst’s Concept of Semiotic Remediation**

To understand how Dr. Walker became enmeshed in the complex ecology of New York City in the early 1900s through the use of a mother-daughter chronotope, I have investigated the ways that a far-flung network of stakeholders invested in the ecological infrastructure within which this chronotope was deployed. While this chapter has attempted to consider the ways that these “investments” made it possible for Walker to successfully deploy a mother-daughter chronotope, it has only been able to draw limited conclusions about the ways that her rhetorical acts shaped this ecological infrastructure.

I argue that an understanding of the ways that Walker used the resources at her disposal to shape this infrastructure depends upon an understanding of the ways that she *remediated* a mother-daughter chronotope from one context into another context, repurposing its spatiotemporal dynamics. Paul Prior and Julie Hengst’s concept of *semiotic remediation* informs my understanding of this process. Prior and Hengst write that semiotic remediation helps us consider the ways that

“activity is (re)mediated—not mediated anew in each act—through taking up the materials at hand, putting them to present use, and thereby producing altered conditions for future action” (1). Prior and Hengst’s concept of semiotic remediation can help us theorize how Walker borrowed the mother-daughter chronotope from one context (an idealized domestic space) and deployed it in a very different context (the public lecture halls of New York City).

Seen through the lens of semiotic remediation, Dr. Walker’s mother-daughter chronotope was not simply a rhetorical frame that she deployed in order to navigate the constraints of a complex rhetorical situation. It was, instead, an entire “world” that she worked to materialize at a moment when this world could play a consequential role in the public sphere. Specifically, the spatiotemporal world that Walker worked to materialize had the potential to delimit the ways that people would imagine and enact their relations with one another, and in turn to delimit how information would circulate throughout the city. Semiotic remediation, in other words, offers us a concept that helps us deepen our understanding of something that has been implicit throughout this chapter—Walker’s deployment of a mother-daughter chronotope was not only an attempt to put a particular kind of spatiotemporal world *into* circulation. It was an attempt to *recirculate* a particular kind of spatiotemporal world, and in doing so to put this spatiotemporal world to use. When Walker deployed a mother-daughter chronotope, it helped her achieve particular aims in the public sphere; but it also transformed the public sphere in a general way, creating spatiotemporal relations between strangers that structured their interactions regarding varied issues of common concern, not only issues of

sexual health. Walker's mother-daughter chronotope, in other words, became a building block that may have altered the nature of the public sphere itself. Though my study was not able to discuss the ways that Walker's deployment of this chronotope produced "altered conditions for future action," I believe that Prior and Hengst's concept of semiotic remediation could productively contribute to such a goal in future research.

Focusing on the ways that an individual rhetor remediated a spatiotemporal world from one context into another context encourages us to think not only about how rhetors shape their surroundings or adapt to their surroundings but also about how their rhetorical acts contribute to the unending reorganization of the complex contexts within which they are enmeshed. My study of Dr. Emma Elizabeth Walker's life trajectory contributes to such a goal, offering a lesson in the organization and reorganization of the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. Walker's collected documents tell a story not only about her rhetorical performances but also about the ecological infrastructure within which she worked and the ways that this infrastructure reshaped and operationalized her semiotic resources throughout her lifespan. When WWI began, Walker found herself enmeshed within a changed infrastructure. The social hygiene movement was suddenly animated by a new set of ideals—namely, the protection of our fighting forces from venereal disease (*Social Hygiene Vol. IV*). The U.S. government took a more active role in shaping the movement, asking Walker to lecture in multiple contexts throughout the war.

In 1924, late in her career, Walker wrote to the Y.W.C.A.'s Education and Research Division for information about how she might refer to herself when



composing a résumé. They informed Walker that she should be referred to as “a lecturer on the staff of the Bureau of Lecturers of the Committee on Social Morality, War Work Council of the Young Women’s Christian Associations” and added, “That sounds very lengthy but is apparently the only accurate way of stating it.” Walker’s title, a Frankenstein’s monster of institutional mergers, incorporations, and consolidations offers a hint of the enormous transformations that ecological infrastructures can undergo when systems of power invest in their re-articulation. But we should continually remind ourselves, when studying how systems “invest” in the circulation of rhetoric, that these investments come not only in the form of direct support but also in “infrastructural” forms that are less visible but undoubtedly more complex.

## CHAPTER IV

### TESTING AN INFRASTRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE THROUGH AN EXAMINATION OF DISCOURSE ON THE FACEBOOK PLATFORM

To study the practices of semiotic remediation that characterize the digital public sphere and the spatiotemporal worlds that rhetors materialize through these practices of semiotic remediation, this chapter examines a corpus of texts very different from the one that I examined in the previous chapter. In the previous chapter, I was able to draw conclusions about the ways that a dispersed ecology shaped the infrastructure within which a rhetor was enmeshed. And I was able to draw conclusions about the ways that this rhetor “invested” in this infrastructure by deploying a particular chronotope. The previous chapter examined a historical case in which it was difficult to draw conclusions about the effects of a rhetor’s acts; the archival documents that I studied did not document the interactions of Emma Walker and the young women who she interacted with. Without a record of Walker’s interactions with her audiences, I could only draw limited conclusions about the ways that her rhetorical acts shaped the ecological infrastructure within which she was enmeshed.

In this chapter, in contrast, I have chosen to examine a space of discourse in which interactions between rhetors and audiences can be easily studied. Specifically, this case study examines public responses to the writing of Alexander Gray, whose use of the pseudonym “#blacklivesmatter” at his local Starbucks—and

his story about a barista who was compelled to shout the slogan in a room full of strangers—was shared by nearly 50,000 strangers on Facebook. The comment thread that emerged in response to Gray’s viral post offers us a record of thousands of rhetors who deployed the semiotic resources afforded them by their personal histories. Because the Facebook interface makes a record of these deployments publicly available, the case study that I undertake in this chapter includes a much fuller accounting than the previous case study of the ways that rhetors’ practices of semiotic remediation shape their interactions with strangers.

By studying the ways that rhetors deploy—or “remediate”—particular chronotopes in digital contexts, I hope to better understand the ways that they contribute to shaping the future of the public sphere. I suggest that these practices of semiotic remediation should be understood as “investments” in the ecological infrastructure within which public rhetors participate. By this, I mean that every rhetorical act contributes to the materialization of particular kinds of spatiotemporal worlds, and in so doing contributes to the building and maintenance of an ecological infrastructure that outlasts the rhetorical situation at hand. Through this kind of analysis, this chapter shines a spotlight on a different part of the “infrastructural” process according to which rhetors transform the public sphere. The previous chapter examined the ways that an individual operated within an ecological infrastructure shaped by the “investments” of a complex ecology composed of people, texts, objects, and environments. The subject of the previous chapter, in other words, was the infrastructure within which an individual rhetor worked. This chapter, in contrast, focuses on the ways that a distributed web of

rhetors worked to *build and maintain* an ecological infrastructure through practices of semiotic remediation.

Ultimately, this case study contributes to an understanding of the ways that rhetors “invest”—through practices of semiotic remediation—in the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere, and in so doing alter the relational dynamics of this infrastructure. At the end of the previous chapter, I proposed that Paul Prior and Julie Hengst’s concept of semiotic remediation might enable us to better theorize the ways that particular acts contributed to the transformation of the public sphere. Prior and Hengst define semiotic remediation as “the diverse ways that semiotic performances are re-represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity” (2). As they explain, this concept contributes to an understanding of the ways that “activity is (re)mediated—not mediated anew in each act—through taking up the materials at hand, putting them to present use, and thereby producing altered conditions for future action” (1).

Because I am interested in theorizing the emergent dynamics according to which rhetors and audiences in today’s public sphere become linked to one another, understanding the ways that rhetors use the available means of persuasion to produce “altered conditions for future action” is of particular importance to me. Analyzing Gray’s engagement with the more than 3,500 comments written in response to his viral Facebook post, this study pays particular attention to one rhetor’s attempts to navigate a comment thread that evolved, in the space of five days in July of 2016, from a semi-private convivial network to an activist counterpublic, and from a deliberative polis to a flash point for “filter bubble”

(Pariser) discourse. While tracing these evolutions, I consider the extent to which rhetors' engagements with one another via the Facebook platform can be theorized as practices of semiotic remediation—how these rhetors took up the materials at hand, put these materials to use, and in so doing produced “altered conditions for future action.”

Through this case study, then, I argue that digital technologies and platforms delimit the ways that rhetors make use of the resources that they carry with them, and in turn shape the kinds of spatiotemporal worlds that can be materialized in today's public sphere. I focus, in particular, on the ways that rhetors took up *chronotopes* in ways that contributed to the materialization of particular kinds of *spatiotemporal worlds*. As I discussed in Chapter II, I use the term *chronotope* to refer to a spatiotemporal trope that rhetors can deploy. I use the term *spatiotemporal worlds* to refer to the worlds, both material and “imagined,” that rhetors work to materialize by deploying these *chronotopes*. These *spatiotemporal worlds* are worlds in which *time and space work in particular ways*.

An attempt to theorize the entire ecological infrastructure within which this comment thread's thousands of participants operated is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I focus my discussion on three aspects of the comment thread that are especially salient to my discussion of rhetors' practices of semiotic remediation: the Facebook platform itself, habits of embodied sociality rooted in the offline world, and shared *spatiotemporal worlds* that participants successfully materialized through their interactions with one another. I have chosen to focus on these three aspects of the comment thread because I believe that each one calls attention to the

strange interplay between the material and the imagined relations of the public sphere. As I have argued, our ability to understand the ecological infrastructure within which rhetors operate depends upon an ability to understand both the material and the imagined dynamics according to which they become relational with one another in particular historical moments.

Through an analysis of the ways that the participants in a single comment thread worked to materialize these spatiotemporal worlds, I consider the extent to which rhetors and audiences contributed to the building of “worlds to live in” (Terranova) through practices of semiotic remediation. Within this comment thread, I observe rhetors speaking back to one another, framing and reframing the issue at hand, and ultimately altering the thread’s spatiotemporal dynamics in consequential ways. Through analysis of the ongoing “back-and-forthness” (Jackson and Wallin) that took place in the thread, one can also observe how this ecological infrastructure shaped the ways that strangers oriented themselves in relation to one another.

I focus, in particular, on the ways that Alexander Gray responded to the thread as it evolved, enacting practices of semiotic remediation that enabled him to orient strangers according to a chronotope of “civil discourse.” By analyzing Gray’s engagement with his readers, I conclude that he worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world born of paradoxical investments.

### **#MakeEmSayIt: The Rhetoric of Alexander Gray**

On July 7, 2016, Alexander Gray (username: Lex Cross) posted an image on his Facebook page that would be shared nearly 50,000 times and seen—by the

writer's own estimate—14.25 million times over the course of five days. It was an image of a Starbucks cup. In the space where the cup would usually display the customer's name, Gray's cup read "#blacklivesmatter." His caption explained: "Changed the name on my Starbucks app to #blacklivesmatter so the barista has to shout it to a room full of people when they put my order on the bar." In addition to going "viral" and becoming a top news story in Facebook's "Trending" section, Gray's post was covered by news outlets such as *Time*, *The New York Daily News*, *Teen Vogue*, *Essence*, *The Huffington Post*, *The San Diego Union Tribune*, *Buzzfeed*, *Business Insider*, *the International Business Times*, *Vibe*, *BET*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Boston Herald*, *Eater*, *The Grio*, *The Montreal Gazette*, and others. The post garnered 3,500 direct responses and thousands of others across the web. Dozens of copycat rhetorical acts were reported across the country, many of which also went viral on social media. As one Starbucks employee wrote on twitter, "43 people during my shift at work (starbucks) told me their name was black lives matter for their drink/food orders today" (Rutherford).

Gray told BuzzFeed that the attention his post received was unexpected: "I expected a few likes and a few eye rolls. I never imagined that over [47,000] people would share it [...] Just goes to show that a lot of people just want people to hear that black lives matter and want people to say it out loud ... And if that doesn't work, maybe people will be so sick of hearing [#BlackLivesMatter] that they stop killing us" (Rutherford). Caught unaware by the attention that his writing received, Grey moved quickly to make the "viral" moment a meaningful opportunity to further the

cause of racial justice. In a comment written in response to his original post, he encouraged others to perform similar rhetorical acts across the country:

Finally figured out how to let the public comment on the original post. THANK YOU ALL for riding this wave! We all want the same thing and that's to see some change in this world. DO THIS. MAKE EM SAY IT.

I have zero interest in people's comfort levels being pushed when people are dying. Take video! Ask why they won't say it! Look at the reaction from the people in the room.

#MakeEmSayIt  
#BlackLivesMatter  
#thankyouALL

The friends and strangers who joined Gray in this comment thread participated in something that felt at times like a thriving deliberative polis and at other times like a toxic forum for invective and provocation. Analyzing the comment thread that evolved in response to Gray's text, I use an infrastructural model of the public sphere to identify and analyze some of the varied spatiotemporal worlds that rhetors worked to materialize. In order to eventually consider how these rhetors shaped the ecological infrastructure within which they were embedded, I begin by attempting to understand the dynamics of this infrastructure.

While an analysis of the content of these texts could certainly yield insights about the chronotopes that structured these rhetors' relationships to the Black Lives Matter movement, to racial hierarchies in the U.S., and to the philosophy of liberal individualism, ideological analysis of this kind is beyond the scope of the present study. Instead, I focus my attention on the ways that the rhetors participating in this thread contributed to the building of a space characterized by particular spatiotemporal dynamics.



To this end, I now turn to an examination of the constitutive role that the Facebook platform itself played in shaping rhetors' practices of semiotic remediation.

### **The “Infrastructural Layer” and the “Data Layer”: An Analysis of One Facebook Comment Thread**

When we write with others via the Facebook platform, we participate in a variety of communication practices that are undeniably “social.” The more than 3,500 comments written in response to Gray’s post exhibit the writing practices that make the social web distinctive—emojis, memes, gifs, embedded links, tags, videos, polarized political discourse, personal insults. Yet while commenting on a Facebook post may feel like participating in a “conversation” that mimics the dynamics of embodied social life, and may feel like an act that takes place within a “space” that mimics other spaces that we have inhabited throughout our lives, the ways that these “conversations” and “spaces” emerge in social media depend upon a material infrastructure of interfaces and algorithms that lie just beneath the surface of rhetors’ digital encounters.

An infrastructural model of the public sphere encourages us to understand not only how social media platforms shape our practices directly but also how these platforms—in coordination with a network of texts, semiotic resources, technologies, bodies, and environments—become enmeshed within simultaneously material and “imagined” infrastructures that are continually shaped by the investments of rhetors. Though scholars in our field have considered the ways that platforms serve as spaces for particular kinds of identity performances (DeLuca),

how platforms help students develop rhetorical capabilities (Balzhiser et al., Fife), how platforms shape user experiences (Coad), and how platforms influence the ways that we communicate (Swartz, Vie), they have not highlighted the most notable aspect of social media platforms—the fact that they these platforms are designed to work in coordination with an existing ecology of relationships and practices. Social media platforms, in other words, are different from other platforms precisely because they *accommodate* the relationships and practices of users. They are, by design, welcoming to a wide variety of spatiotemporal worlds that characterize our social lives.

As Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon explain, however, these human relationships only constitute one part of the platform—its “community layer,” which consists of “platform participants and the relationships between them.” A rhetor’s ability to participate in a wide variety of spatiotemporal worlds on social media depends upon a platform’s ability to integrate this “community layer” with an “infrastructural layer,” which consists of “software tools, rules and services” and a “data layer,” which provides the information necessary to balance supply and demand. In the comment thread that emerged in response to Alexander Gray’s post, the Facebook platform’s “infrastructural layer” and its “data layer” played a crucial role in shaping the ecological infrastructure within which rhetors operated, and in turn played a crucial role in shaping the kinds of spatiotemporal worlds that rhetors could materialize in this “space.” John Gallagher’s work is of particular relevance to my investigation of the ways that the Facebook platform accommodated these spatiotemporal worlds. As Gallagher writes, our ability to engage in textual

exchanges that mimic the dynamics of “conversation” relies upon two aspects of social media interfaces. First, social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and WordPress enable “frequent text exchange”—participants can write back and forth to one another repeatedly. Second, these platforms enable proximate “text placement”—writers can comment on a text by placing their own texts close to it. In the comment thread that emerged in response to Gray’s post, this ability to quickly respond to others, and to contribute to an asynchronous dialogue that would evolve over the course of five days, made it possible for rhetors to materialize a variety of spatiotemporal worlds within a single venue.

I want to argue that this polymorphism is a defining feature of social media platforms. Other mass media have often delimited the kinds of interactions that rhetors and audiences can engage in. For example, television’s unidirectional, mass-audience nature encourages rhetors to deploy a “broadcasting” chronotope; handwritten letters, because of the ways that they are created, delivered, and consumed, encourage a certain kind of one-to-one intimacy. In contrast, the Facebook platform strives to serve as the ground upon which a variety of spaces can be materialized. It is not only a venue for particular kinds of interactions between writers and readers. It is also a venue for the creation of varied spatiotemporal worlds that can be created and inhabited by strangers.

Platforms such as these offer such openness deliberately, of course. They are designed to compete for users, and to foster the interaction of these users for profit. As Paul Choudary writes, social media platforms have been able to “*invest in behavior design*”, eliciting ‘new behaviors that had never existed in the past’ and

ensuring that ‘users stick around of their own accord’ (qtd. in Langley and Leyshon 14). If social media platforms are designed to be relatively open-ended venues within which diverse relations can be enacted (and, in turn, monetized), then these platforms must incentivize rhetors to spend their time in these venues. In order to gather as much data as possible about the interactions of these users, they must encourage rhetors and audiences to join one another in this “space,” and to enact as many of their activities there, together, as possible. Through the “summoning-up of the popular passions and interests” of the “platformed masses” (Lovink and Tkacz, qtd. in Langley and Leyshon 14), platforms like Facebook “have been particularly successful at not only attracting large audiences but, by subjecting their data to close analytical scrutiny, offering advertisers and their clients more forensic and targeted consumer marketing campaigns” (Langley and Leyshon 12).

Successfully developing platforms within which millions of users choose to invoke and inhabit spatiotemporal worlds, in other words, is big business. An exemplar of a new form of capitalist accumulation that Nick Srnicek has termed “platform capitalism” (Srnicek), the Facebook platform has turned social interactions into revenue through the seamless integration of its community layer, its infrastructural layer, and its data layer. The Facebook platform, that is, operates within a larger economy in which the relations between writers and readers are mined for value. Through the creation of “a single, private network with a centralized, cloud computing architecture which hosts a population of a couple of billions of accounts” (Terranova), the Facebook platform “positions itself between

users, and as the ground upon which their activities occur, which thus gives it privileged access to record them” (Srnicek).

In other words, the Facebook platform’s “infrastructural layer” and its “data layer” work to accommodate whatever kinds of “worlds” rhetors wish to build together, so long as they spend their time in those worlds. In practice, this has meant designing a platform that encourages rhetors and audiences to socialize in ways that mimic and extend the dynamics of their embodied social lives. This can be seen in the comment thread that emerged in response to Alexander Gray’s viral post. The rhetors participating in this thread materialized varied, and sometimes seemingly incompatible, spatiotemporal worlds by bringing their own semiotic resources to bear during their interactions with one another. But they didn’t do so freely, in a neutral space of possibility. We can see, instead, that the Facebook platform’s “infrastructure layer” and its “data layer” worked to orient people within the “space” of the comment thread, delimiting the ways that they might deploy chronotopes that would contribute to the building and maintenance of particular kinds of spatiotemporal worlds. The thread’s early comments worked to build a space that was only semi-public—a text would be seen by “friends” with a degree of connection to a rhetor or her interlocutors:

- I ❤️u!!!
- Genius!
- You have to tell me if this works. lol
- Clever af
- Bruh....yes.
- Lovvvvvveeeeeee Thissssss
- Lmaooooooooo that's witty
- Love it

Because these messages were addressed directly to Gray, they worked to materialize a chronotope that we might call “one-to-one convivial exchange.” According to this familiar spatiotemporal trope, two participants stop to engage one another in brief moments of friendly chit-chat, usually in a busy social environment. Though these texts were certainly read by many strangers, each invoked a world of potential bystanders, not interlocutors. In other words, these texts didn’t explicitly acknowledge the presence of public audiences. This “one-to-one convivial exchange” chronotope was characteristic of early comments on the thread, when the platform’s “infrastructural layer” and its “data layer” had created a space open only to “friends” and “friends of friends.”

After the text became part of Facebook’s “Trending” section, however, the operations of this platform’s “infrastructural layer” and its “data layer” suddenly expanded this comment thread’s relatively bounded infrastructure, resulting in the inclusion of thousands, perhaps millions, of bystanders and participants. While Gray’s text was described as a “viral” text, I believe that it is more productive to understand its circulation in terms of the scope of the infrastructure within which it became available to strangers, who gathered to read it, discuss it, and share it with others. As Gray’s personally curated infrastructure became a vastly expanded infrastructure through the operations of the Facebook platform’s “infrastructural layer” and its “data layer,” this platform’s affordances of frequent text exchange and proximate text placement supported the creation of worlds very different from the everyday world of friendly exchange that Gray and his friends had worked to materialize.

Finding themselves amongst thousands of strangers who had arrived via an algorithmic, personalized “Trending” feature of the platform, many of the writers in the thread deployed a “public comment” chronotope. This “public comment” chronotope, as I define it, is a cluster of relations rooted in editorials, televised soundbites, and town hall meetings. It is characterized by a single speaker sharing her opinion with a large audience of strangers.

The following are just a few of the many comments that deployed this “public comment” chronotope in response to Gray’s post:

And if a white person did this with white lives matter or cops lives matter or all lives matter we would be cussed out or be told we're creating race hate etc.

No spending in any establishment that is not minority owned could make the biggest impact financially! Baton Rouge residents caused the mall to shut down for the day by not spending one dime. Let's hit them where it hurts & only then will they listen. Money talks. This was a great idea by the way lol I wish I could've seen everyone's face

So here's the thing you can scream "black lives matter" until your face turns blue but until people start to believe his you're just straining your chords.

People should start putting the names of the victims. Say their names...

To use a metaphor rooted in the embodied world, Gray’s private party became a town hall meeting. And that town hall meeting was transformed as well, becoming a space within which a variety of spatiotemporal worlds were materialized by rhetors. As a networked, algorithmic material ecology brought greater numbers of strangers into contact with Gray’s text, the relatively accommodating “space” of the Facebook platform was repurposed by rhetors who brought their own semiotic resources to bear on its construction. Rhetors, operating within an infrastructure

shaped by the material and algorithmic churn of the platform itself, came to constitute the “community layer” that was integral to its functioning.

Through the deployment of a “one-to-one convivial exchange” chronotope, rhetors materialized a public sphere in which already-established bonds with “friends” structured rhetors’ interactions. Later, through the deployment of a “public comment” chronotope, rhetors materialized a different kind of public sphere; namely, a public sphere in which individuals took turns delivering their opinions to a crowd. As the comment thread evolved, in other words, rhetors made use of the facebook platform to position themselves in relation to one another, and to position their readers in relation to one another, making possible new spatiotemporal relations.

### **The “Community Layer”: An Analysis of One Facebook Comment Thread**

In order to theorize how rhetors built varied spatiotemporal worlds within a single comment thread, I return to Jodie Nicotra’s discussion of the nature of digital writing in “‘Folksonomy’ and the Restructuring of Writing Space.” In this piece, Nicotra argues that writing is “the *building of a space* rather than the production of a text” (W263). This spatial and architectural dimension of rhetorical practice is especially apparent, Nicotra writes, in the digital world, which is a world open to re-articulation at the hands of users.

An analysis of the texts written in response to Gray’s post reveals that the participants in the comment thread materialized spatiotemporal worlds that mimicked the embodied spaces of offline sociality. In doing so, they delimited the ways that strangers could imagine their positioning in material spaces, the forms of



intimacy and solidarity that might characterize these spaces, and the practices of deliberation, protest, and collective action through which strangers could interact with one another. Participants, for example, materialized the space in two different ways: as a bounded space one could enter and leave at will, and as an embodied space in which bodies could encounter one another. Both materializations created spatiotemporal worlds that affected how participants could interact with one another, how they would be “public” and engage the other members of that public. The spatiotemporal worlds that these rhetors materialized shaped how strangers behaved in relation to one another—whether they stayed and talked, when they decided to “leave,” and how they imagined themselves as members of a gathered “we.”

Participants, for example, reinforced a vision of the comment thread as a bounded space that strangers could enter and leave at will. They drew lines of belonging and exclusion. They exiled particular rhetors from the imagined space of the thread. They invoked, for themselves and others, virtual bodies that could be positioned in relation to one another in particular ways. In doing so, they reinforced the spatial quality of the comment thread in ways that enabled them to police the boundaries of an imagined community of deliberators, and ultimately to shape the ways that deliberation and social action could occur in this venue. Responding to a post critical of the Black Lives Matter slogan, one of these rhetors wrote

Boo hoo. Take ur white tears extra chin and high cholesterol somewhere else. Another user responded by using the word “we” to refer to the African-American community:

Because white lives are not being targeted by police you simple ignoramus.

And cops chose a profession; we didn't choose to be born into a racist society.

Over the next 18 minutes, 26 comments attempted to explain the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” to argue for a particular understanding of police killings of African-Americans, and to refute the writer’s claims. The writer responded to many of these comments, continuing to defend her criticisms of the Black Lives Matter movement, then declared, “I’m out.”

Participants in this thread explicitly referenced an imagined spatial dimension of the thread, deploying a chronotope that attempted to materialize a particular kind of spatiotemporal world in the pseudo-space of the comment thread. By encouraging the writer to “go somewhere else” and by following it up with a comment that used the pronoun “we,” the rhetors in this comment thread deployed a chronotope—or spatiotemporal trope—according to which relations of belonging or exclusion depended upon one’s positioning inside or outside of a bounded space. This spatiotemporal world was organized along racial lines, materializing “in” and “out” spaces that reflected broader ideologies about shared identities and life experiences. When the writer ended her engagement with these strangers, she worked within the spatiotemporal world that other users had materialized, using a phrase—“I’m out”—that reinforced the same chronotope that others had deployed.

We can see, in other words, that the spatiotemporal world that these writers attempted to materialize was successful. In a practical sense, these writers successfully policed the “space” of the comment thread, resulting in the exit of a writer who had offended them. In a more “infrastructural” sense, these writers

materialized a spatiotemporal world within which others could join them. They successfully transformed the comment thread into an imagined space by remediating the spatiotemporal dynamics of the offline world within the accommodating “space” offered by the Facebook platform. Later in the thread, other writers reinforced the same chronotope, writing, “If you dont care for black lives why are you even here???” and “I don’t know how in the hell I ended up on this thread. Leaving.” Another began a comment with the phrase “To every non-ignorant or non-racist person here ...” And another wrote, “Scram Lady.”

We can see, in other comments, that in addition to materializing an imagined world with particular spatiotemporal contours, writers remediated the embodied habits of offline spaces. In a very basic sense, writers created virtual bodies for themselves through writing, populating their spatiotemporal worlds by using emojis, acronyms, and punctuation to laugh, cry, scream, clap, and gesture. In doing so, they reinforced the pseudo-space of the comment thread in ways that affected how strangers might imagine themselves within an imagined scene of interaction:

😂👏👏👏👏  
smh  
Palm to face  
😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂  
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Others referenced the body in ways that structured interaction more explicitly. One rhetor, for example, reinforced the spatiality of the comment thread by encouraging another rhetor to “sit down,” a phrase that was used by multiple rhetors:

How does this comment exactly help? How many people did this comment save ? Sit down.

By referencing another rhetor's imagined body within the imagined space of the comment thread, this rhetor attempted to materialize a spatiotemporal world in which one's right to speak would depend upon the extent to which the community values one's contributions. And while this phrase is certainly a colloquialism, and not a command to *actually* take a seat in the imagined "space" of the thread, at least one of the writers being addressed called attention to the strangely embodied nature of the request—in response, she wrote, "I am already sitting down .. Since I'm on a computer." As this joking comment attests, the seeming disjunction between the material ecology that rhetors inhabit and the "imagined" worlds that they build together is never fully resolved. As Bakhtin writes, the concept of the chronotope assumes that we inhabit a "complex fluid unfinalized and unfinalizable world" (Prior and Shipka 186).

While these rhetors were not the first to imagine a comment thread in spatial terms or to mimic embodiment in networked space (these chronotopes have dominated networked communication from the beginning), these invocations are notable because they shaped deliberation and social action in consequential ways. By invoking a public space with an inside and an outside, with insiders and outsiders, and with norms of inclusion and exclusion, these rhetors materialized spatiotemporal worlds significantly different from the "one-to-one convivial exchange" world that had dominated the thread before its viral moment. This despite the fact that the affordances of the interface remained the same.

Through metaphors and other means, participants in this comment thread worked to invoke spatiotemporal worlds that positioned strangers in crowds with one another, and sometimes in opposition to one another. In doing so, these rhetors worked to materialize subtle spatiotemporal dynamics that made possible particular forms of collectivity and individuality. We might think of these moves as less material and more rhetorical. But this doesn't make them any less consequential. Their effect—organizing a spatiotemporal world, and thus the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere—is as consequential as any act. One participant, for example, referred to Gray in a way that lumped him in, spatially, with other supporters of Black Lives Matter, or possibly African-Americans in general. She wrote

Ignorant douchebag scum! Keep yourselves segregated and in this dumbass mindset. That'll get yas far!!! All lives matter. Blue lives matter!!!   

In this comment, the writer addressed a crowd. Despite the fact that Gray didn't attempt to position himself as part of a crowd or collective, the writer attempted to script him into this imagined relation. In addition, the writer attempted to position herself in opposition to this crowd. The mental image, for me, is of a solitary counterprotestor attempting to provoke a gathered crowd. Later, another stranger used a collective pronoun to articulate a very different chronotope:

There will never be a non racial society till we stop this. All live matter to me and always will

Certainly, the use of the pronoun "we" is a commonplace way to comment about one's society. But this writer's use of the pronoun also materialized a spatiotemporal world within which strangers might experience a sense of

collectivity, and a subtle spatiality. It asked them to imagine themselves standing together, as a collective, committed to a particular course of action. In contrast to the messages that were written to Gray directly, and in contrast to the messages that were written to a crowd that included Gray, this message was written to all of humankind. While most of the texts that worked to materialize a “one-to-one convivial exchange” world didn’t receive any responses, this text received a number of responses from strangers. Instead of commenting about Gray’s Starbucks stunt, these writers engaged in a discussion of the slogan “all lives matter”:

-They dont all matter to some. Black lives are not valued by many and are seen as another number to fill up prison. That is why we must stress their are people whos lives matter just as much to the law enforcement and justice system. It is important white people express this especially or things will never change.

Other strangers used memes—shareable images posted to the comment thread—to respond. Even when using these multimodal resources, many writers referenced an imagined space populated by embodied participants. One meme, for example, read “Yes, this is how stupid you look” with an image of a hand sticking an “#alldreamsmatter” sign in Martin Luther King Jr.’s face. This meme restaged the conflict between two slogans—“Black Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter”—in a particularly *embodied* way. The rhetor attached these conflicting ideologies to bodies, positioning them in relation to one another.

By deploying chronotopes rooted in the offline world to materialize particular spatiotemporal relations between the commenters, each participant in this conversation attempted to materialize a particular kind of spatiotemporal world. In doing so, these rhetors worked to alter the kinds of interactions that might

characterize the “space” of the comment thread. While the Facebook platform provides rhetors with an infrastructure designed to help them maintain a social network, it does not—to a great extent—prescribe the kinds of relations that will characterize the interactions between rhetors. The platform encourages rhetors to create spatiotemporal worlds that they wish to inhabit. Individual rhetors, in interaction with an ecological infrastructure that has been built and maintained by millions of other rhetors, and which is composed of bodies, semiotic resources, technologies, environments, and a host of other factors, invest in the building and maintenance of these infrastructures.

### **Writing in Shared Spatiotemporal Worlds**

Thus far, I have considered the ways that the participants in a comment thread remediated chronotopes rooted in the offline world, and in so doing worked to materialize spatiotemporal worlds that others might inhabit. My ultimate goal, however, is to consider the ways that rhetors populated these worlds *together*. In other words, I intend to investigate how rhetors invest in ecological infrastructures in ways that prove consequential, shaping the nature of discourse in a space. To study the ways that thousands of rhetors imagined their relations with one another is, of course, an impossible task. But by focusing on the interactions between Gray and the rhetors who “gathered” on his facebook page, I have been able to shine a spotlight on moments when rhetors participated in the building of shared spatiotemporal worlds. I have also been able to examine moments when participants abandoned these worlds, and moments when participants engaged in conflict about the nature of these worlds.

These worlds, however, were fleeting and offered relations that, while furthering the discussion, were not necessarily consequential. They were, in a sense, relational possibilities that gained traction but didn't necessarily alter the infrastructure of the public sphere. Other rhetorical investments, however, were more lasting, and did alter the spatiotemporal dynamics between rhetors. As I demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, the rhetors participating in this thread materialized spatiotemporal worlds that were politically consequential. In addition to orienting strangers in relation to one another during their fleeting Facebook interactions, rhetors appear to have altered the ways that their interlocutors conceptualized the very nature of the public sphere. By investing in particular "social imaginaries" over others, these rhetors did more than passively "adapt to" or "coordinate with" the ecology within which they were enmeshed—they altered it.

We can see this effect in the way that Gray consistently attempted to materialize a particular spatiotemporal world that he might inhabit with his readers, even when these attempts conflicted with the dynamics according to which these readers were oriented within the "space" of the comment thread.

My analysis of the comment thread reveals that Alexander Gray worked to materialize a "civil discourse" chronotope that aligned with his broader vision of the nature of the public sphere. Following James Calvin Davis's definition of the term in *In Defense of Civility*, I use the term "civil discourse" to refer to "the exercise of patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (or



especially) with those whom we disagree” (159). Andrea Leskes further defines civil discourse according to nine criteria. A person engaging in civil discourse must

- undertake a serious exchange of views
- focus on the issues rather than on the individual(s) espousing them
- defend their interpretations using verified information
- thoughtfully listen to what others say
- seek the sources of disagreements and points of common purpose
- embody open-mindedness and a willingness change their minds
- assume they will need to compromise and are willing to do so
- treat the ideas of others with respect
- avoid violence (physical, emotional, and verbal). (47).

Leskes’s criteria overlap with the normative criteria for deliberation proposed by public sphere theorists such as Habermas, Dewey, and Arendt. It is relevant to point out, however, that whereas these theorists tend to prioritize deliberation, consensus, and action, those committed to civil discourse prioritize *understanding*. Based on Gray’s reflections about his interactions with strangers on Facebook, it is clear that he envisions the public sphere not only as a space of deliberation but also as a space in which rhetors must win the hearts of minds of those who disagree with them. His public sphere is one in which *understanding* is necessary before action. It is a public sphere in which, as he wrote, “cultural change comes slowly.” A rhetor must “take the little steps to climb a mountain.” In other words, Gray’s “civil discourse” chronotope invoked a spatiotemporal world according to which practices of civil discourse necessarily lead to systemic change.

When addressing strangers who had responded to his Facebook post, for example, Gray used phrases such as “If you want to understand ... ” and “If you’d like to have an open conversation ... ” and “May I ask ... ?” and “I ABSOLUTELY AGREE.” He thanked strangers for being civil, despite disagreements, and for acting like

“adults” and “humans.” He told others that he wouldn’t tolerate insults or personal attacks on his Facebook page. Two weeks after his viral post, Gray wrote a letter to Howard Shultz, Chairman and CEO of Starbucks, in which he reflected about his engagements with strangers in the comment thread:

I believe change is possible because I’ve seen it happen. My post has sparked conversation. It has created a forum for people to openly discuss race. I have experienced many positive interactions in this forum. When the shouting stops and the talking begins, I can see that many people are ready to listen and empathize with each other. I’ve walked away from many conversations that started as personal insults with the feeling that I reached another human and we truly understood each other.

One such “response conversation” began five days after Gray’s original post, when a stranger wrote in response

HOW ABOUT ALL LIVES  
ALL ALL ALL ALL  
NO ONE RACE OR PERSON IS BETTER! All people just want to go home and love theirs all wanna work and live and just fucking survive day to day! Quit letting the big assholes create another civil war! Black white brown fucking green or if your a damn yeti  
ALL AND I REPEAT AGAIN ❤️❤️❤️ALL ❤️❤️❤️LIVes MATTER!!!

This rhetor’s comment worked to materialize a spatiotemporal world very different from the one materialized through Gray’s use of a “civil discourse” chronotope.

Though we can only speculate about the origin of the semiotic resources that the writer remediated through this rhetorical act, her use of exclamation marks, all caps, imperative statements, curses, and repetition seems to have been an attempt to materialize a spatiotemporal world in which dialogue based on mutual understanding was not prioritized. This practice of “sounding off” exists in varied media, including speech. “Sounding off” has proven famously compatible with the Facebook platform. The habituated rhetorical practices of the social web support a

rhetor's desire to shout her opinion to a vast, passive audience with whom she seems to occupy a shared "space." And the material interface of the facebook platform enables a rhetor to "sound off" in response to another rhetor's post with minimal effort and maximum speed, for a potential audience of millions, by placing her text in close proximity to that rhetor's text. In addition to invoking particular kinds of relations with her audience, this "sounding off" chronotope reinforced a vision of the public sphere, or as Charles Taylor would term it, a "social imaginary." In contrast to a public sphere based on deliberation and consensus or a public sphere based on the evaluation of evidence, this writer invoked a public sphere in which rhetors would express their individual "takes" on issues of public concern, but wouldn't turn to strangers to deliberate about these issues.

Gray responded to this writer's "take" with an analogy meant to challenge her thinking about the Black Lives Matter movement:

All cancers matter but Susan G Komen chose to focus on breast cancer. Why? Because it is wise when people focus their efforts on a single problem in order to eradicate that specific problem and not spread themselves too thin and give no problem the full attention it needs. Nobody accuses them of saying colon cancer doesn't matter. Nobody thinks they hate people with brain cancer.

The writer responded:

I understand that every person is human every person makes mistakes every person can be a murdering asshole or a good guy it depends on the man/woman not their color

A few others responded, and Gray addressed the writer again:

I just want you to know that this is what a conversation should look like. I know people lash out and I can understand being defensive.

All we disagree about is the wording and not that there is a problem. I can work with that. The wording is just a reminder of what we have noticed

people have ignored or forgotten for far too long. It is specific and focused. Just like the cancer foundation. Just like product red.

Our constitution says all men were created equal but that didn't include people who looked like me at the time. And a lot of people saying all lives matter aren't including me either. They are erasing me. This is why I say #blacklivesmatter.

Thank you for the civil conversation.

While Gray attempted to seek common ground with the writer, others expressed frustration:

- [F]rankly, it's tiring to see white people proclaim "all lives matter!" [...] Sometimes white people need to shut up and listen.
- ALM is just something to say like a one up its petty and every single time it gets the clapback it deserves

I see Gray working against these spatiotemporal dynamics while others attempted to reinforce them. Responding to the rhetor whose post worked to materialize a “sounding off” chronotope, Gray again deployed a “civil discourse” chronotope that reinforced his vision of how the public sphere should work:

I can tell you this. In this moment, I appreciate you. I've checked many a privilege in my life when it comes to gay rights and woman's rights. I know it's not simple to see things from a side you've never stood on but I have much hope that you will understand. I've made a lot of mistakes and hurt a lot of people before I learned that I was hurting people.

Coming to a thread where #blacklivesmatter is the theme and proclaiming that all lives matter hurts people. It may seem like a small thing but Blacks have felt dismissed for a very long time. We all believe that all human life matters and we must all continue to fight for that belief. But again, some need to focus on certain ways to keep us alive and others need to focus on others. But the BEST way to work TOGETHER is to not draw attention from what one movement is doing.

Again, thank you for showing up open minded and having public conversation. I know it's not easy to put yourself out to be attacked and still stick with it.

Significantly, Gray's insistence paid off, and his rhetorical action changed the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere, if only for a single stranger.

Ultimately, this "civil dialogue" chronotope *did* result in the materialization of a spatiotemporal world, creating "altered conditions for future action" (Prior and Hengst 1). In response to Gray's message, the writer wrote:

Thank you and I appreciate you, you've opened this thread knowing what ppl would say and the drama that it would open yet you still gave voice to your heart to a passion that ppl will not always understand.

She added that much of her anger about the Black Lives Matter movement stemmed from fear about the fate of her children, who are mixed-race, in a world in which so many people "are separating the races still." She added, later in the thread, "This depresses me and scares me."

While this writer began participating in this thread by shouting her truth to a crowd, she ended it in a vulnerable one-on-one discussion with a stranger that exemplified many of the tenets of civil discourse. Participants thoughtfully listened to one another. They were open-minded and willing to change their minds. They sought sources of disagreement and possibilities for common purpose. In the process of turning a space animated by a "sounding off" chronotope into one animated by a "civil discourse" chronotope, these writers called upon the semiotic resources available to them. And they remediated these resources into the shared space of the comment thread, working to build a world that they could inhabit, if only for a few hours.

The writers who participated in this comment thread remediated chronotopes in ways that contributed to the building of shared spatiotemporal

worlds with strangers. In doing so, they reinforced particular social imaginaries according to which the strangers gathered in their midst might conceptualize the public sphere. Charles Taylor defines social imaginaries as “The ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (qtd. in Steger and James, 31). As Lee and LiPuma explain, Taylor understands a social imaginary to be “a quasi-objective social totality” based on “reciprocal performative acts.” Though Taylor’s concept of a social imaginary resonates with the concept of a *spatiotemporal world* that I have elaborated in this dissertation, my ability to productively apply the concept to the case at hand necessitates that I draw a distinction between the two terms. Building upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, I have used the term “spatiotemporal world” to denote the kind of imagined “space” that rhetors build together, through practices of semiotic remediation. In building these spaces, rhetors position strangers in relation to one another according to particular spatiotemporal dynamics, and in so doing create “altered conditions for future action” (Prior and Hengst 1). Similarly, a social imaginary is an invoked world built through the small acts of rhetors. Unlike the spatiotemporal worlds that writers and readers build through fleeting rhetorical encounters, however, a social imaginary is a larger and more durable imagined world; it exists as a broader cultural consciousness that depends upon the participation of thousands, and it lasts much longer than the rhetorical situation at hand. Taylor focuses his analysis on three of these imaginaries: the public sphere,

the citizen-state, and the market. Each depends upon what he calls “a performative construction of collective agency.” While I believe that social imaginaries and spatiotemporal worlds operate on different scales, it is instructive to consider the interplay between these scales during moments of rhetorical action. My study of the texts written in response to Alexander Gray’s post has encouraged me to pay particular attention to the social imaginaries according to which the writers and readers in this comment thread came to understand themselves collectively, as a public. Did Gray’s interactions with this writer alter the social imaginary according to which she, and possibly others, conceptualized the nature of the public sphere? Did these interactions leave a lasting legacy on the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this study. However, I do believe that the existence of the collective body that we call “the public” depends upon small interactions such as the ones that I have studied in this chapter. To conclude, I explore the consequential nature of these individual rhetorical acts.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the ecological infrastructure within which a rhetor operates necessitates investigating our material and imagined worlds on multiple scales—from the spatiotemporal worlds that we materialize in particular rhetorical situations to the national and international “social imaginaries” according to which rhetors become bound to thousands of strangers<sup>7</sup>. In other words, adopting an

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor’s concept of a social imaginary also resonates with the work of Harold Mah, whose theory of the “phantasmic” process according to which strangers come to see themselves as a collective agent I discussed in Chapter II.

infrastructural perspective means attending to the ways that rhetors orient themselves not only in relation to a dispersed ecology composed of texts, technologies, bodies, and environments, but also within an imagined world of collective bonds linking thousands of strangers to a public, a market, and a nation.

As I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, however, a digital platform's "community layer" does not operate in a neutral space free of constraints and influences. On the contrary, it exists in constant interaction with the platform's "infrastructural layer" and its "data layer." Hence, when we consider the "building of a space" that rhetors in this comment thread participated in, I believe that it is important to consider not only the nature of the "imagined" spaces that they invoked but also the ways that a project of platform capitalism fostered the conditions that made these invocations possible. An investigation of this "community layer," then, is not an analysis of a virtual, immaterial world apart from the real world. It is an investigation of spatiotemporal worlds that rhetors build through the use of a platform that profits from the emergence of these worlds.

As I have argued, however, our field has tended to ignore what I believe to be one of the most notable aspects of these platforms—the fact that their revenue depends upon an ability to *accommodate* a wide variety of practices and identities. As Nicotra writes, "The more users participate in the site, both adding to it and commenting on the objects that other people have added, the richer and denser—and hence more valuable—the network becomes." (W265). In light of this tendency toward "platform capitalism," I believe that we should pay increased attention to the ways that rhetors work together to build spatiotemporal worlds. How, for example,



do rhetors invite one another to build these worlds together? How do they materialize the spatiotemporal dynamics of these worlds? How do they reinforce the norms that already characterize a particular communication landscape? Ultimately, how do they produce “altered conditions for future action” (Prior and Hengst 1)? Investigating these questions necessitates that we consider the ways that writers and readers “remediate” the dynamics of one space for use in another space, in the process creating spaces that echo other spaces that they have inhabited.

My study of the comment thread that emerged in response to Alexander Gray’s post demonstrates that a distributed network of rhetors contributed, in fleeting moments, to the building of spatiotemporal worlds. But it also demonstrates that these spatiotemporal worlds were politically consequential. Participants in this comment thread remediated semiotic resources in ways that reinforced broader *social imaginaries* according to which they might conceptualize their relations with strangers. Of course, not all of Grey’s attempts to deploy this “civil discourse” chronotope were successful. One writer called him “scum” and said that he had a “dumbass mindset.” Grey responded, “If you’d like to have an actual conversation then I’m open. Even with your opening remarks being personal insults.” He received no response. The fact that Gray did not successfully influence all of this thread’s participants to join him in the spatiotemporal world that he wished to materialize, however, does not invalidate his rhetorical investments or his ability to alter the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. On the contrary, unpredictability is a defining feature of rhetorical investment. The full effects of Gray’s investments in

this infrastructure cannot be judged by studying immediate results. These effects, instead, must be understood as “infrastructural” effects.

## CHAPTER V

### PRACTICING RHETORIC IN AN INFRASTRUCTURAL PUBLIC SPHERE: A

#### CONCLUSION

When I was just beginning the research that would one day become this dissertation, one of my faculty advisors observed that rhetoricians and compositionists are less apt today to use terms such as “public” and “the public sphere” than they had been 15 years earlier. He wondered aloud whether our field’s “public turn” was running out of steam. A year later, at a national conference, another scholar who I admire wondered whether the term “publics” was burdened with “too much baggage.” Though somewhat disheartening for a graduate student hoping to study the public sphere, these observations came to play a generative role in the creation of this dissertation.

Why, I wondered, had the language of public sphere theory appeared less and less often in our scholarship? One could attribute this diminished enthusiasm for public sphere theory to the natural ebb and flow of influence. The English translation of Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was first published in 1989, introducing the evocative “sphere” metaphor to scholars in the humanities and social sciences, who soon extended its lifespan with critiques, revisions, and elaborations. One might assume that networked forms of mobilization and deliberation would necessitate a reconsideration of the relationship between writing and the public sphere, leading to a reinvigoration of

our field's "public turn." One might assume, as well, that during an era in which social movements such as Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and the anti-Trump "Resist" movement have brought questions of political mobilization and collective power to the fore, the concept of the public sphere would be more relevant than ever. But while rhetoricians and compositionists continue to study phenomena that are profoundly public, the call to synthesize public sphere theory and composition studies—a "turn" that seemed to reinvigorate composition pedagogy in the 1990s and early 2000s—has been tinged with pessimism. Our "public turn" is plagued by concerns about location and scale. We worry that our classrooms are separate from the "real" public sphere and that our students remain disconnected from the authentic publics that engage in this sphere. While championing the idea of a "protopublic," for example, Rosa Eberly admits that the classroom is an inherently "prefab" space, hindered by the "institutional supports and constraints" of the university context and the instructor's position in relation to institutional power (172). In addition, compositionists face a perpetual mismatch between the macro-level social, political, and economic diagnoses of the "health" of the public sphere and our field's hyper-local commitments to the agentive action of individual rhetors. As Christian Weisser argues, compositionists have focused too much on written documents while "fail[ing] to address the historical, social, and political forces that continually shape and reshape our conceptions of a 'public sphere'" (59). In short, the story of the public turn in composition studies is a story of teacher-scholars struggling to bridge the divide that separates the classroom and the wider public sphere. Though we express hope that our students can shape the public sphere in

significant ways, our attempts to develop public writing pedagogies that do justice to the decentralized, networked dynamics of today's public sphere have too often left our students disconnected from the new modes of political engagement that characterize it.

This dissertation has been an attempt to develop an infrastructural model of the public sphere that provides a foundation for writing pedagogies that meaningfully engage students in the evolving communication landscapes that they will encounter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An infrastructural model, I have argued, helps us theorize how individuals contribute, through small acts of rhetoric, to the transformation of public spheres that are ecological but also historical, real but also "imagined," and posthuman but also profoundly human. By encouraging rhetors to understand their acts as collective investments in an ecological infrastructure, this model seeks to focus attention on the strangely collective ways that rhetors contribute to the transformation of the public sphere.

Still, it may not be enough to ask rhetors to be reflective about the kinds of "investments" that they are already making in the public sphere. To conceptualize the ways that rhetors transform the public sphere, we cannot imagine them to be only happenstance actors or passive "investors." Public spheres still need rhetors. So, what are the implications of this model for a rhetor who finds herself in a particular rhetorical situation, needing to make decisions about how to address particular audiences? If this rhetor adopts an "infrastructural" understanding of the public sphere, how should this affect the rhetorical choices that she makes? While an infrastructural model may help us study and theorize rhetoric as a phenomenon,

can it also form the foundation for rhetorical practice? In other words, can it serve as a foundation for the kind of public writing pedagogy that I have called for?

To some extent, this is ground that I have already covered, at least implicitly. This dissertation has already considered the extent to which rhetors are enmeshed within ecological infrastructures and the extent to which their acts contribute to the transformation of these infrastructures. The infrastructural model that I have begun to develop emphasizes relationality in ways that help us understand what it means to practice public rhetoric in the 21st century and beyond. But the work that I have done in this dissertation is only a first step. What I haven't yet considered, and what this conclusion takes as its primary subject, is the question of conscious rhetorical choice. How can rhetors make conscious choices about how they participate in an "infrastructural" public sphere?

To begin to answer this question, I start by highlighting the relational nature of the infrastructural model of the public sphere that I have developed. I argue that a focus on *relationality* can help us consider the kinds of choices that public rhetors make when they address audiences. Then, in the following sections, I focus on two aspects of public rhetorical practice that I believe should be examined in light of this relational understanding of the public sphere: 1) politics and 2) consequentiality. In the first section, I discuss the political considerations that rhetors must take into account when acting rhetorically in a public sphere whose relational dynamics are shaped by the practices of its participants. More specifically, this section considers the ways that rhetors might bring their political commitments regarding the future of the public sphere to bear on their interactions with audiences. In the next section,

I investigate the extent to which an infrastructural model of the public sphere changes our understanding of the ways that rhetors become consequential in the public sphere. I argue that this model's relational understanding of the public sphere encourages rhetors to focus less on the ways that they impact discrete groups of readers and more on the ways that they can alter the spatiotemporal dynamics according to which strangers become linked to one another across time and space. By adopting a relational understanding of public rhetoric, rhetors can embrace the "ecological" unpredictability of the public sphere without sacrificing a sense of intentionality.

### **Being Relational in the Public Sphere**

Though I have introduced a number of concepts in this dissertation that might help us theorize the choices that individual rhetors have to make when they address audiences (ecological infrastructure, rhetorical investment, spatiotemporal world, etc.), it has become clear to me that these concepts are all, at root, attempts to theorize the same thing—*relationality*.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I defined relationality as "*the ways that strangers become linked to one another, and enact these links, through discursive, cultural, and material practices.*" Regarding the connection between relationality and the public sphere, I wrote

Each time that a rhetor addresses an audience, whether in digital or non-digital contexts, she shapes the dynamics according to which humans "act together." When we consider these relational dynamics in the aggregate—examining how countless numbers of strangers become linked to one another across time and space—we begin to see how this interplay of discursive, cultural, and material practices gives rise to a particular kind of social space: the public sphere.

According to the infrastructural model that I developed in subsequent chapters, rhetors work within an ecological infrastructure that is essentially a web of relations. Drawing upon the work of Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel, I defined the public sphere in Chapter I as “a set of contested and complementary, affective and desire-laden imaginary social phenomenon brought into being through multiple acts of rhetorical poesis, addressed to strangers and occurring over time and in spaces that are simultaneously discursive, cultural, and material” (21). Much of the dissertation that followed was an attempt to theorize how these social phenomena are brought into being.

While my efforts to re-theorize the public sphere as an “infrastructure” or an “ecology” may seem to stretch Habermas’s concept beyond recognition, and may cause some to question why we would want to retain the concept at all, I hope to have demonstrated that public sphere theory offers rich and varied ways to conceptualize relationality. Far from being a radical departure from the work of public sphere theorists, a focus on relationality brings us closer to what the public sphere has always been about. In fact, this impulse to theorize the public sphere as a network is nearly as old as public sphere theory itself. In a passage written just two years after the English translation of Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Craig Calhoun suggested that a model of the public sphere based on a “network” metaphor might be preferable to one that assumes the co-existence of multiple publics. Because this passage resonates so strongly with the infrastructural model of the public sphere that I have articulated in this dissertation, I believe that it is worth quoting in full:



It seems to me a loss simply to say that there are many public spheres ... for that will leave us groping for a new term to describe the communicative relationships among them. It might be productive rather to think of the public sphere as involving a field of discursive connections. Within this network there might be a more or less even flow of communication. In nearly every imaginable case there will be clusters of relatively greater density of communication within the looser overall field ... For each cluster, we might ask not just on what thematic content it focuses but also how it is internally organized, how it maintains its boundaries and relatively greater internal cohesion in relation to the larger public. (37)

The public sphere, in other words, is not defined by its spatial characteristics or by the kinds of deliberation that characterize it. Fundamentally, the public sphere is a relational phenomenon.

When rhetors address audiences, they reinforce, subvert, reinvent, and manage these relations. In doing so, they transform the public sphere in an “infrastructural” way, creating the conditions for certain kinds of relationality between people, and in so doing laying the groundwork for certain kinds of joint action between them. An infrastructural model of the public sphere, in other words, encourages rhetors to ask, *What are the contours of the ecological infrastructure within which I am enmeshed? What are the possibilities for inhabiting this ecological infrastructure? How does this ecological infrastructure delimit the ways that strangers might inhabit shared worlds with one another? And how might my own acts shape this infrastructure in consequential ways, delimiting how strangers might inhabit and alter it?*

Fundamentally, these are questions about relationality. If we conceptualize the public sphere according to this master term “relationality,” and conceptualize public rhetoric as an attempt to change the forms of relationality that characterize the public sphere, I believe that we can productively reconceptualize what it means

to practice rhetoric in public. Recently, for example, rhetoricians Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer have argued that the public sphere should not be theorized as a zone—with an inside and an outside, divided by a public/private border—but instead as a “network” or “web” made up of emergent relationalities. In a passage that resonates with the claims that I have made in this dissertation, they argue that metaphors such as “sphere” and “counterpublic” emphasize the “static” and “regional” nature of the public sphere while obscuring the ways that its dynamics are constituted through circulation and process.

I believe that my infrastructural understanding of the public sphere proves itself flexible enough to help us conceptualize the changing nature of our relations with strangers. During an era in which networked technologies are rapidly changing these relations, it has become especially clear that our old ways of conceptualizing public association—through metaphors of “conversation” and “counterpublicity,” for example—will continually prove inadequate to the task of addressing these unprecedented changes.

### **Being Political in the Public Sphere**

Public sphere theory has always been rooted in the political commitments of its theorists. As Harmut Wessler writes, the term “public sphere” isn’t just a neutral term for everything that happens in public; instead, the term “carries both a descriptive and a normative connotation.” As I near the end of this dissertation, I am aware that I have worked almost exclusively in a *descriptive* mode—this dissertation has attempted to theorize how the public sphere works. While attempting to theorize how the public sphere works, I have neglected to make

claims about the way that it *should* work.

This neglect of the normative dimension of the public sphere is intentional, and reflects my commitments as a writing instructor. In my classroom, I continually ask students to articulate a *politics* of public rhetorical practice. By this, I mean that I ask my students to articulate their own hopes and desires about the ways that their texts will circulate and become consequential with readers. Before they circulate their work, I want them to think about the impact that their texts might have in the real world, both in the short term and in the long term. To this end, I ask students to study the forms of relationality that already exist in particular spaces and to reflect about the forms of relationality that they might want to establish with strangers in these spaces. I ask them to reflect about the legacies that they might leave in these spaces, and even to reflect about how they might contribute to the broader transformation of the public sphere. In the terms that I have developed throughout this dissertation, we might say that I ask my students to reflect about the kinds of *investments* that they want to make in the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere. Because I want my students to reflect about individual desires, goals, hopes, and tactics, I have developed a model of the public sphere that does not make any claims about the current state of the public sphere or its ideal future state. It only offers a vocabulary with which we can make these kinds of claims and act upon them.

So, how should a rhetor, enmeshed within an infrastructural public sphere, enact her personal politics? In keeping with my belief that the public sphere is a fundamentally relational phenomenon, I believe that rhetors should focus on the

ways that they become relational with strangers. Central to a *politics of relationality* is the belief that any particular issue of common concern—a proposed minimum wage hike, the availability of government funding for Planned Parenthood, a controversy about diversity in film casting—is of secondary importance. A rhetor guided by a politics of relationality focuses, first and foremost, on the spatiotemporal dynamics according to which we gather together to discuss these issues, mobilize in the streets to fight for these issues, and establish bonds with strangers around these issues. While particular issues of common concern come and go, the spatiotemporal worlds that we build together leave legacies that outlast our particular social and political causes.

Conceiving of relationality as a political priority is an approach that finds support in the work of public sphere theorists. In “The Pragmatic Ends of Popular Politics,” for example, Harry C. Boyte argues that a false distinction between private lives and larger systems has led us to believe that our practices of “making life” are distinct from our practices of “making history.” As he writes, this distinction “obscures the actual living agency of ordinary people along the borders between the everyday and the systemic, the fashion in which power never operates simply in a monochromatic and unidirectional fashion but always is a complex, interactive ensemble of relationships” (349). This understanding of the public sphere as an “ensemble of relationships” suggests that our small acts of rhetoric, no matter how local and seemingly inconsequential, play a role in shaping society on a larger scale. And it suggests, as well, that the small acts of individuals are political acts, with import beyond the times and places that they inhabit.

Chantal Mouffe also offers a relational understanding of the public sphere that highlights its political nature. In her discussion of liberal democracy, she writes that this political model isn't just a set of practices or a form of government; it is also a "symbolic ordering of social relations" and "a specific form of organizing human coexistence politically" ("Democracy" 245-246). To understand how these relations are continually organized, and to understand the role that individuals play in organizing these relations, Mouffe argues that we must make a distinction between "politics" and "the political." As she writes, "the political" is a "dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations ... [It] can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations" (*The Democratic Paradox* 101). In contrast, "politics" is "an ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions" that seeks to reorganize society as a whole. Considering the specific case of liberal democracy, Mouffe writes that this political philosophy works to domesticate the varied, conflictual realm of "the political" as a means of establishing a certain kind of "politics"—a nation-centered public sphere based on tolerance for conflicting viewpoints. In doing so, liberal democracy creates an "us/them" distinction that turns enemies into legitimate adversaries bound to one another according to shared "ethico-political principles" (*The Democratic Paradox* 101). We might say, in other words, that liberal democracy creates a certain kind of public.

I believe that Mouffe's distinction between "politics" and "the political" offers a useful framework for public rhetors reflecting about how they become relational with their audiences. By considering the continual interplay between "politics" and "the political," I believe that rhetors can more meaningfully reflect about how their

everyday practices—the messy, conflictual exchanges that they engage in online and offline—are related to the broader, more enduring relational dynamics of the public sphere. Like Boyte, Mouffe offers a relational understanding of the transformation of the public sphere. She reinforces the central tenet of the infrastructural model that I have begun to develop—when rhetors “act together,” they contribute to the building and maintenance of an infrastructure that delimits the ways that strangers can become relational with one another. What the work of Boyte and Mouffe adds is a focus on the political nature of this process. Attention to this political dimension encourages us to investigate the extent to which our rhetorical acts are in line with our broader political commitments.

One way to attend to this political dimension is to investigate how the chronotopes that we deploy in our everyday lives contribute to broader hegemonic conflicts that fall under the category of “politics.” In an earlier study, for example, I considered the reader comments posted in response to an article about Tucson high school’s Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program. I focused, in particular, on a comment that challenged the value of ethnic studies curricula by arguing that “innocent modern european-americans” were not responsible for “‘crimes’ that may have occurred in the distant past.” Using Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, I analyzed this comment as an example of what George Lipsitz has called “the overdetermined inadequacy of the language of liberal individualism to describe collective experience” (381). In other words, I identified this comment as an exemplar of a particular ideology: liberal individualism.

However, through the lens of an infrastructural model of the public sphere, and with the work of Mouffe in mind, I am now more inclined to consider not only the content of this writer's comment but also the spatiotemporal world that he or she worked to materialize. And I am inclined, as well, to consider the extent to which this spatiotemporal world contributed—in this particular instance and in other instances—to the larger “politics” that led to the banning of the city's ethnic studies curriculum. If I were to analyze this comment thread again, using this new framework, I might focus less on its explicit ideology and more on the ways that it positioned people in relation to one another, across space and time, and in so doing made possible and impossible particular kinds of solidarity and collective identity. Seen in this light, the writer's assertion that we need to “leave the past behind and move forward” so we don't remain “mired in the conflicts of the past” did much more than share an opinion. It also worked to materialize a world in which time, space, and identity would work in particular ways. Most importantly, it materialized a world that made the existence of alternative spatiotemporal worlds unworkable, even inconceivable. The political impact of this spatiotemporal world was very real for a program like Tucson's Mexican-American Studies program, which attempted to link historical crimes and present-day oppression by calling into being a category of Mestiza/o identity that would transcend nation and tribe.

Hence, there is something inherently political at stake in the ways that we ask strangers to become relational with us. Whenever we address strangers, we ask them to join us not only in building a particular kind of spatiotemporal world but also in foreclosing the possibilities of alternative worlds. Rhetoricians, I believe, are

well positioned to investigate this political dimension of the public sphere. Some have even begun to pursue this kind of work through an ecological lens. Johanna E. Hartelius and Jennifer Asenas, for example, argue that that despite the “posthuman” nature of rhetorical circulation, rhetors have an ethical responsibility to consider the roles that they play in “reinvigorating” the language that they recirculate. Similarly, Kristen Seas considers the ways that the willed acts of rhetors can “cultivate” systems that may or may not be on the verge of tipping points. And Catherine Chaput, building upon Edbauer’s concept of rhetorical ecologies, has proposed a model of affective circulation that helps us consider the ways that rhetors become ensnared in processes of value generation, often unconsciously. She argues that rhetors should “increase communicative exchanges that circulate positive affects—to deliberate in such a way that we all become more open to the world’s creative potential” (21).

Although this dissertation has shied away from making claims about how the public sphere should work, I believe that it offers a foundation for theorizing the ways that rhetors can articulate and act upon their own normative ideals. As I have argued, public rhetoric is an inherently political practice. Each time that we act rhetorically with strangers, we participate in materializing spatiotemporal worlds that work in particular ways, and in the process foreclose alternative possibilities. As I have argued in this dissertation, however, our attempts to shape the relational dynamics of the public sphere are always speculative endeavors. We act within, as I wrote in Chapter II, highly unpredictable “webs of people, objects, technologies, semiotic resources, and environments.” As such, we should not call our rhetorical



acts “political” because they cause exactly the kinds of changes that we wish to enact. Our rhetorical acts should be understood as political, instead, because they contribute to the building and maintenance of the public sphere, a distributed, complex process that we can only speculate about and continually observe. Though we can’t predict whether our rhetorical acts will result in lasting changes, in other words, we can make judgments about the ways that we invest—along with the other constituents of the distributed webs that we inhabit—in particular forms of relationality. Doing so means observing how these forms of relationality are reinforced and repurposed, and ultimately how they appear and reappear in the world that we inhabit together.

Applied to classroom pedagogy, a focus on the political dimension of relationality encourages students to critically assess the infrastructures within which they are already enmeshed and to reflect about the ways that they might “postulate some kind of link” to a world that might emerge. To encourage this kind of reflection, I have experimented with pedagogies that ask students to reflect about the roles that readers and writers are expected to play in different kinds of “textual dramas.” In my classroom, I have often asked students to imagine a text as a drama taking place in an embodied space. *If this text were a room, what kind of room would it be? How would people be situated in relation to one another? What would they do? What would their body language be like? What kinds of relationships would participants establish with one another?* Exploring the ways that these textual dramas are “scripted”—the ways that they recur in predictable ways or deviate

from expectations—students gain awareness of the power of such “scripts” to delimit how we imagine the public spheres within which we write.

Through discussions like these, students reflect about how particular forms of relationality emerge and recur throughout the public sphere, coming to dominate in particular times and places, while other forms of relationality remain marginalized. Ultimately, many of them begin to develop their own normative theories about the state of the public sphere. As Wessler defines them, normative theories of the public sphere “specify ideal characteristics of public communication, as well as conditions conducive to their realization, and help to evaluate critically existing communication.” When it comes time to write, students who have reflected about the dominance of particular kinds of “dramas” are better prepared to articulate political commitments regarding the kinds of relationality that they want to foster in the public sphere. Guided by their beliefs about the ways that the public sphere should work, my students are able to situate their rhetorical practices in relation to their broader political ideals, and to eventually articulate political commitments that serve as the foundation for their rhetorical acts throughout the semester. Part of encouraging students to develop this “infrastructural” awareness, of course, means encouraging them to understand that individual rhetors don’t catalyze widespread societal change simply by imposing their will upon the world. Instead, I encourage my students to understand that the transformation of the public sphere—the broad societal shifts that many of them want to advocate for—are rooted partly in the relational dynamics that exist between writers and readers. In reflecting about these societal shifts, my students come to understand the consequential nature of

relationality. By focusing less on persuading large audiences and more on reinforcing particular forms of relationality in the public sphere, many of my students come to see that their small, forgotten acts of rhetoric are part of a larger process with significant political implications.

### **Being Consequential in the Public Sphere**

We take action in the public sphere because we want to be consequential. We want to have an effect, to change something. But the ways that we conceptualize our own consequentiality depend largely on our beliefs about the relationship between rhetorical practice and social change.

In this dissertation, I have already demonstrated that rhetors deploy chronotopes that contribute to the materialization of particular kinds of spatiotemporal worlds. Often, as I demonstrated in Chapter IV, these interactions are fleeting. As a result, it is usually difficult to determine—for rhetors and for researchers—the extent to which rhetorical acts contribute to the transformation of the public sphere. This challenge is compounded by the fact that public sphere theory has rarely taken up the question of how individuals can transform the public sphere. More often than not, public sphere theorists have followed either descriptive approaches (What is the state of the public sphere today?) or normative approaches (What norms should individuals follow when they deliberate?). Neither of these approaches leads directly to a theoretical understanding of the consequential ways that individual rhetors transform the public sphere.

Without a model of the ways that rhetors transform the public sphere, we risk falling back on commonsense understandings of consequentiality. We adopt, for

example, a “Think Globally, Act Locally” understanding of consequentiality, which suggests that rhetors can transform the public sphere in direct and uncomplicated ways. According to this understanding of the public sphere, the “will of the people” can be enacted through an aggregation of individual acts, often culminating in some form of collective action, purpose, or re-organization. Though this commonsense understanding of consequentiality hints at the complex and distributed nature of social change, it offers an essentially agentic understanding of the process—through acts of will, individuals move incrementally from personal goals to societal change.

Or, we adopt an ecological understanding of consequentiality, which swings the pendulum too far in the other direction, suggesting that we attribute to individual rhetors an incredibly limited measure of agency. Through the lens of complexity theory, for example, the “global” often remains mysterious to those engaging in more “local” work of rhetorical practice. Byron Hawk discusses this radically emergent view of complex systems articulated in the work of Mark C. Taylor. He compares agents to ants, stating, “[E]ach ant reacts only to its immediate neighboring ants and circumstances, but the larger flow of the colony nevertheless has a coherent, complex movement” (183). Though the colony has “no equivalent of a ‘mind’ at the level of the whole,” it adapts to its environment as if it does, seeming to “react” to new situations like an agent in its own right (183). As Margaret Syverson writes, quoting William Paulson, in a complex ecology there exists “a discontinuity in knowledge between the parts and the whole” (4). Because the ecology model sees this discontinuity between the “global” and the “local” as

fundamentally unbridgeable, it has not helped us theorize the consequential ways that individuals willfully invest in the ecologies within which they are enmeshed. According to this model, rhetorical consequences remain fundamentally unpredictable.

An infrastructural model of the public sphere, however, strikes a balance between agency and powerlessness through a focus on *relationality*. Working to change the public sphere, according to an infrastructural model, means embracing the unpredictability of the ecological processes that link us to strangers. In other words, we can't assume that the small acts of rhetors necessarily contribute to broader changes in predictable, linear ways.

On the other hand, an infrastructural model acknowledges that rhetors are not completely disconnected from the transformation of the public sphere—they can reflect about the ways that their small acts invest in a broader infrastructure. Rather than focusing, in other words, on instrumentality (how rhetors make things happen) or unpredictability (how rhetors *can't* make things happen) an infrastructural model focuses on *consequentiality* (how rhetors create the conditions under which things become possible, whether intentionally or not). Becoming consequential within a public sphere of this kind means contributing to the building and maintenance of an infrastructure within which larger societal changes might materialize. It means creating the conditions for certain kinds of spatiotemporal relations between people, and in doing so laying the groundwork for certain kinds of joint action.

This infrastructural understanding of consequentiality resonates with the

work of rhetorician Laurie Gries who, like me, has eschewed the impulse to make blanket statements about the measure of agency that individual rhetors possess. An approach based on consequentiality, as Gries writes, focuses our attention not on the power of individual agents but instead on the ways that “rhetoric materializes, circulates, transforms, and sparks new material consequences, which, in turn, circulate, transform, and stimulate an entirely new divergent set of consequences. It is, in simple terms, a distributed network of becomings in which divergent consequences are actualized with time and space” (“Iconographic Tracking” 346). Though Gries’s study focuses on the ways that a single image became consequential within such a “distributed network,” her new materialist framework enables us to understand the ways that rhetors of all kinds “enter into diverse kinds of relations” and spark consequentiality in the world (“Iconographic Tracking” 337). Instead of focusing on agency, in other words, Gries focuses on consequentiality.

I believe that this focus on consequentiality can help rhetors productively theorize the ways that they participate in the public sphere. Rather than focusing on how much agency she possesses (an oddly theoretical question for a rhetor to ask herself), a rhetor might instead focus on how she might participate in “a distributed network of becomings.” To do so, she might focus on the ways that her own resources—the genres, technologies, and embodied habits that she carries with her—might interface with the world that she finds herself in. A focus on consequentiality, in other words, encourages rhetors to become attuned to the particular dynamics of the worlds that they inhabit *and* to reflect about the ways that their own resources might be leveraged to reinforce or alter these dynamics.

I believe that this infrastructural understanding of public rhetorical practice can prove valuable for rhetors who wish to participate in the distributed, seemingly spontaneous mass mobilizations that have animated the public sphere in recent years. As Mark and Paul Engler have argued, we have tended to misunderstand these mobilizations because we have adhered to a “transactional approach” to social change—an approach that emphasizes “getting things done” through incremental wins. They argue that we haven’t paid enough attention to a “transformational” approach to change—an approach oriented toward “altering the climate of public debate to make more far-reaching changes possible over time” (“How to Create an Ecology of Change”). As they write, scholars have neglected to study “the ebbs and flows of mass mobilizations” due to the fact that these mobilizations are too often seen as “spontaneous occurrences that owe their success to the zeitgeist of history.” Rather than theorizing mass mobilizations as spontaneous happenings, Engler and Engler propose that we focus more attention on the ways that individuals “spark, nurture and sustain periods of mass defiance.” Translating this claim into the theoretical vocabulary that I have developed throughout this dissertation, we might say that Engler and Engler recommend focusing attention on the ways that public rhetors invest in the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere.

As I have argued, this is a fundamentally collective process. And it is an ecological process. As such, we aren’t meant to ask how an individual can catalyze it. Still, I believe that it is worth considering how individual rhetors can conceptualize the roles that they play in transforming the ecological infrastructures within which they are enmeshed. Engaging in this “infrastructural” kind of politics, as I have

argued, is less about getting things done—seeing a broad societal impact that matches one’s intentions—and more about open-ended practices of investment. This emphasis on open-ended, processual action resonates with what Noah Roderick has termed “the ethics of linking and locality.” When rhetors begin to reflect about how they participate in “a distributed network of becomings,” and in so doing “spark, nurture, and sustain” particular kinds of change, I believe that they can better align their rhetorical acts with their broader societal goals.

Though it is only a first step, I believe that reflecting about how we “invest” in the ecological infrastructure of the public sphere is an important step. In my classroom, I have taken early steps toward encouraging students to reflect about how their small acts of rhetoric might interface with the acts of strangers in the public sphere. Last year, for example, I asked students in my classes to investigate a space of discourse and diagram the ways that writers’ texts might contribute to the transformation of this space. They could use images, arrows, words, and symbols. In response to this assignment, many of my students produced diagrams that offered novel understandings of collective rhetorical action. One student drew a cylinder, covered in stick figures. These stick figures represented writers. As the student explained, each of the writers would add something small to the vortex-like motion of this cylinder, creating an effect like a tornado. Another student drew a river, and placed writers on the banks of the river. Each writer was pictured throwing a text into the river. The meaning, as the student explained in his description of the diagram, was that the writers contributed to phenomena that they could not predict or control. Downstream, their texts would comingle with other writers and texts,



creating new interactions and possibilities.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I set out to develop a model of the public sphere that would help students “reflect about the ways that their own practices with varied genres and media technologies contribute to the transformation of the digital public spheres that they will encounter throughout their writing lives.” As a step toward developing pedagogies of this kind, I articulated a model of the public sphere that would attune us to its historical nature. I hoped to offer a flexible model that would serve rhetoricians and compositionists whether they were studying the digital public sphere of today or the public sphere of tomorrow.

While I believe that the infrastructural model that I have developed has the potential to influence the ways that public rhetors (and especially student writers) reflect about their consequentiality in the public sphere, I don’t believe that this model enables us to take the next step, which is to *study* this consequentiality. Having conducted a case study focused on digital writing, it has become clear to me that my model is not adequate for studying how rhetors become consequential in the digital landscape. What I discovered, when I began studying writing on the facebook platform, was that much of this platform’s ecological infrastructure remained hidden behind its interface. It was a “black box.” Trying to determine whether rhetors shaped this landscape in consequential ways proved to be more speculative than empirical.

A related challenge presented itself when conducting my earlier case study, which focused on speech and writing. The data available enabled me to study how

an individual rhetor worked within a rhetorical situation. To some extent, I was able to consider the infrastructure that gave rise to the rhetorical situation. But I lacked the methodological tools to conduct a truly “ecological” analysis of the larger infrastructure that was the focus of my case study. The result, in both case studies, was that my data analysis centered—in a rather un-ecological way—on particular rhetorical situations. My analysis of the ecological infrastructures that gave rise to these situations, and my analysis of how these infrastructures were altered, remained largely theoretical.

I believe that the theoretical work of this dissertation has value. But I also believe that pursuing a more systematic study of what I have termed the public sphere’s ecological infrastructure would enable rhetors to more meaningfully reflect about how their rhetorical goals square with their broader societal goals. In the contexts of the digital landscape, I believe that studying the actual (rather than theoretical) consequentiality of individual rhetors would help ensure that we don’t fall back on commonsense assumptions about social change that may or may not prove applicable to the public spheres that we encounter throughout our lives.

### **Directions for Future Research**

When I consider directions for my future research, my initial thoughts focus on remedying the limitations of this dissertation and addressing the kinds of questions that emerged from its research process.

First, I plan to dig deeper into the political nature of public rhetoric. Originally, I set out to develop a model of the public sphere that would “meaningfully engage[] students with the political questions at the heart of public

sphere theory.” To some extent, I believe that my infrastructural model of the public sphere has done this. This model’s flexibility and its attention to change create space for the analysis of the “symbolic ordering of social relations” in particular times and places. But I also feel that this dissertation hasn’t adequately considered the relationship between relationality and power. More specifically, I feel that it hasn’t adequately theorized the ways that our “investments” in the public sphere are rooted in power relations that already structure the social field. To consider how some forms of relationality become dominant while others are marginalized means studying the ways that power becomes concentrated in particular spaces and bodies. Thus far, the model that I have developed has assumed that a focus on relationality will illuminate the workings of power. But it has become clear to me that an adequate model of the public sphere needs to theorize the extent to which power is bound to certain relations over others. In my study of facebook discourse, for example, my focus was on the particular kinds of relationality that the participants in a single comment thread worked to establish with one another. By focusing on the spatiotemporal worlds that rhetors worked to build together, I hoped to hint at the lasting political impact of the ways that strangers established relations with one another. What my model was ill-prepared to help me theorize, however, was the extent to which these relations always depend upon the ways that rhetors are already positioned within a material ecology. Despite my focus on a bounded site of discourse and the relatively varied interactions that this space made possible, it became clear to me throughout this case study that all rhetors do not have equal access to the public sphere’s historically-specific chronotopes. The

discourse that I studied—which focused on the subject of justice for Black lives—was shaped by racial hierarchies that have historically granted authority to some rhetors while denying it to others.

One way to investigate the connection between relationality and power is to develop research methodologies that enable us to study the ways that actual rhetors, in actual situations, succeed or fail in becoming consequential in the public sphere. Because this dissertation started as a theoretical project, I originally saw my case studies as attempts to test, refine, and illustrate the model of the public sphere that I had developed. But what resulted, as I began to conduct these case studies, was a mix of theoretical and qualitative analysis. While I was able to substantiate many of my claims about the rhetorical situations that I studied, my claims about how rhetors altered the public sphere in lasting ways remained theoretical.

Because I plan to continue studying the impact of public rhetoric, I hope to develop research methodologies that enable me to make stronger claims about the consequentiality of public rhetors, and in doing so to more clearly demonstrate the politics at stake in public rhetorical practice. To do this, I believe that I will need to pay particular attention to the strengths and limitations of the research methodologies that I use, and to revise these methodologies in ways that help me focus on the kinds of questions that I want to pursue. I believe that this endeavor will be a significant part of my future research.

In keeping with my interest in developing research methodologies that enable me to study the consequential ways that rhetors alter the public sphere, I would like to pay particular attention to the dynamics of the digital public sphere. As

I wrote in Chapter I, the digital landscape is “a complex material ecology composed of data centers, fiber-optic cables, pay-per-click banner ads, usernames, mobile devices, designed interfaces, and algorithms.” It is clear to me, after conducting a case study focused on digital writing, that tracing the consequentiality of writers in relation to these many moving parts requires a distinct set of methodological tools. In other words, part of working to understand how rhetors become consequential in particular times and places must involve developing methodologies that are particularly suited to the study of these times and places.

As I conclude this dissertation, I feel an urge to defend the concept of the public sphere against the belief that it is burdened with “too much baggage.” Though I will refrain from making that argument now, I believe that my future scholarship will continue to assert the value of a public sphere framework. Though the rapid transformation of the digital landscape has necessitated that we continually re-theorize the concept of the public sphere, I believe that the core ideals of public sphere theory are more relevant than ever. While public sphere theory doesn’t offer us everything, it does offer us a set of commitments—commitments to studying the ways that strangers engage with one another, and through these engagements becoming a different kind of public.

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